

EC
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REVELATION

BAKER
EXEGETICAL
COMMENTARY
ON THE NEW
TESTAMENT



GRANT R. OSBORNE

Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament

MOISÉS SILVA, EDITOR

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GRANT R. OSBORNE



Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament

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To my mentors:

Wes Gerig
Richard Longenecker
Clark Pinnock
I. Howard Marshall

My deepest appreciation for taking the rough granite of my life and sculpting what I am today



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Series Preface

The chief concern of the Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (to be known as BECNT) is to provide, within the framework of informed evangelical thought, commentaries that blend scholarly depth with readability, exegetical detail with sensitivity to the whole, attention to critical problems with theological awareness. We hope thereby to attract the interest of a fairly wide audience, from the scholar who is looking for a thoughtful and independent examination of the text to the motivated lay Christian who craves a solid but accessible exposition.

Nevertheless, a major purpose is to address the needs of pastors and others involved in the preaching and exposition of the Scriptures as the uniquely inspired Word of God. This consideration affects directly the parameters of the series. For example, serious biblical expositors cannot afford to depend on a superficial treatment that avoids the difficult questions, but neither are they interested in encyclopedic commentaries that seek to cover every conceivable issue that may arise. Our aim, therefore, is to focus on those problems that have a direct bearing on the meaning of the text (although selected technical details are treated in the additional notes).

Similarly, a special effort is made to avoid treating exegetical questions for their own sake, that is, in relative isolation from the thrust of the argument as a whole. This effort may involve (at the discretion of the individual contributors) abandoning the verse-by-verse approach in favor of an exposition that focuses on the paragraph as the main unit of thought. In all cases, however, the commentaries will stress the development of the argument and explicitly relate each passage to what precedes and follows it so as to identify its function in context as clearly as possible.

We believe, moreover, that a responsible exegetical commentary must take fully into account the latest scholarly research, regardless of its source. The attempt to do this in the context of a conservative theological tradition presents certain challenges, and in the past the results have not always been commendable. In some cases, evangelicals appear to make use of critical scholarship not for the purpose of genuine interaction but only to dismiss it. In other cases, the interaction glides over into assimilation, theological distinctives are ignored or suppressed, and the end product cannot be differentiated from works that arise from a fundamentally different starting point.

The contributors to this series attempt to avoid these pitfalls. On the one hand, they do not consider traditional opinions to be sacrosanct, and they are certainly committed to do justice to the biblical text whether or not it supports such opinions. On the other hand, they will not quickly abandon a long-standing view, if there is persuasive evidence in its favor, for the sake of fashionable theories. What is more important, the contributors share a belief in the trustworthiness and essential unity of Scripture. They also consider that the historic formulations of Christian doctrine, such as the ecumenical creeds and many of the documents originating in the sixteenth-century Reformation, arose from a legitimate reading of Scripture, thus providing a proper framework for its further interpretation. No doubt, the use of such a starting point sometimes results in the imposition of a foreign construct on the text, but we deny that it must necessarily do so or that the writers who claim to approach the text without prejudices are invulnerable to the same danger.

Accordingly, we do not consider theological assumptions—from which, in any case, no commentator is free—to be obstacles to biblical interpretation. On the contrary, an exegete who hopes to understand the apostle Paul in a theological vacuum might just as easily try to interpret

Aristotle without regard for the philosophical framework of his whole work or without having recourse to those subsequent philosophical categories that make possible a meaningful contextualization of his thought. It must be emphasized, however, that the contributors to the present series come from a variety of theological traditions and that they do not all have identical views with regard to the proper implementation of these general principles. In the end, all that really matters is whether the series succeeds in representing the original text accurately, clearly, and meaningfully to the contemporary reader.

Shading has been used to assist the reader in locating salient sections of the treatment of each passage: the introductory comments, the discussion of structure, and the concluding summary. Textual variants in the Greek text are signaled in the author's translation by means of half-brackets around the relevant word or phrase (e.g., ᾠ-Γερασένος), thereby alerting the reader to turn to the additional notes at the end of each exegetical unit for a discussion of the textual problem. The documentation uses the author-date method, in which the basic reference consists of author's surname + year + page number(s): Fitzmyer 1981: 297. The only exceptions to this system are well-known reference works (e.g., BAGD, LSJ, *TDNT*). Full publication data and a complete set of indexes can be found at the end of the volume.

Moisés Silva

Author's Preface

The purpose of this commentary is not only to provide the reader with exegetical and background information on the text but to help the reader trace the theological threads that tie the book together. Therefore, there is a great deal of intertextual data in the book, and on key words I provide the reader with an overview of the term and related terms throughout the Apocalypse (I use “Apocalypse” and “Revelation” interchangeably for variety) along with theological commentary on the theme in the book.

Also, I want to make this a resource so that students can know where scholarship divides on key issues. Thus I often have fairly lengthy lists of scholars with the various options on an exegetical debate. When I do so, I do not name the date and page number on which their view will be found, unless there is only one to a view or it is an article where the page number is needed (then I follow the standard author-date format). The reason is twofold: (1) in commentaries it is easy to find where a view is stated by looking up the discussion of the relevant verse, and (2) it would be unnecessarily long and tedious to place all those dates and page numbers in a list of (at times) ten or twelve names. It clutters up the page and intimidates the reader.

I have so many people to thank that it is difficult to know where to begin. First, I wish to thank Trinity Evangelical Divinity School for giving me a sabbatical for this project. I also appreciate the kindness and thoughtful critique of my Baker editors, especially Wells Turner and Moisés Silva. Deep appreciation is due my teaching assistants who worked so hard helping with research, compiling lists, and looking up material: Sung-Min Park, Ben Kim, Dana Harris, Love Sechrest, Christine Poston, and Bill Myatt. It is impossible to say how many hours of work they saved me. Finally, I want to say thanks for the secretarial assistance of Judy Tetour, Heidi Harder, Susanne Henry, and Arlene Maas.

Grant R. Osborne

Abbreviations

Bibliographic and General

ABD	<i>The Anchor Bible Dictionary</i> , edited by D. N. Freedman et al., 6 vols. (New York: Doubleday, 1992)
ASV	American Standard Version
BAGD	<i>A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature</i> , by W. Bauer, W. F. Arndt, F. W. Gingrich, and F. W. Danker, 2d ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979)
BDAG	<i>A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature</i> , by W. Bauer, F. W. Danker, W. F. Arndt, and F. W. Gingrich, 3d ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000)
BDF	<i>A Greek Grammar of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature</i> , by F. Blass, A. Debrunner, and R. W. Funk (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961)
BEB	<i>Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible</i> , edited by W. A. Elwell, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988)
DJG	<i>Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels</i> , edited by J. B. Green and S. McKnight (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1992)
DLNT	<i>Dictionary of the Later New Testament and Its Developments</i> , edited by R. P. Martin and P. H. Davids (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1997)
DPL	<i>Dictionary of Paul and His Letters</i> , edited by G. F. Hawthorne and R. P. Martin (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1993)
EDNT	<i>Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament</i> , edited by H. Balz and G. Schneider, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990–93)
HDB	<i>A Dictionary of the Bible</i> , edited by J. Hastings, 5 vols. (New York: Scribners, 1909)
ISBE	<i>The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia</i> , edited by G. W. Bromiley et al., 4 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979–88)
JB	Jerusalem Bible
KJV	King James Version
LXX	Septuagint
MM	<i>The Vocabulary of the Greek Testament: Illustrated from the Papyri and Other Non-Literary Sources</i> , by J. H. Moulton and G. Milligan (reprinted Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976)
MT	Masoretic Text
NA ²⁶	<i>Novum Testamentum Graece</i> , 26th ed., edited by [E. and E. Nestle], K. Aland, M. Black, C. M. Martini, B. M. Metzger, and A. Wikgren (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelstiftung, 1979)
	<i>Novum Testamentum Graece</i> , 27th rev. ed., edited by [E. and E. Nestle], B. Aland,

NA ²⁷	K. Aland, J. Karavidopoulos, C. M. Martini, and B. M. Metzger (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1993)
NASB	New American Standard Bible
NEB	New English Bible
NIDNTT	<i>The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology</i> , edited by L. Coenen, E. Beyreuther, and H. Bietenhard; English translation edited by C. Brown, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975–86)
NIDOTTE	<i>The New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis</i> , edited by Willem A. VanGemeren, 5 vols. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997)
NIV	New International Version
NJB	New Jerusalem Bible
NKJV	New King James Version
NLT	New Living Translation
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version
NT	New Testament
OT	Old Testament
OTP	<i>The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha</i> , edited by J. H. Charlesworth, 2 vols. (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1983–85)
PHILLIPS	<i>The New Testament in Modern English</i> , by J. B. Phillips
REB	Revised English Bible
RSV	Revised Standard Version
RV	Revised Version
SB	<i>Kommentar zum Neuen Testament aus Talmud und Midrasch</i> , by H. L. Strack and P. Billerbeck, 6 vols. (Munich: Beck, 1922–61)
TDNT	<i>Theological Dictionary of the New Testament</i> , edited by G. Kittel and G. Friedrich; translated and edited by G. W. Bromiley, 10 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964–76)
TEV	Today’s English Version
TR	Textus Receptus
UBS ³	<i>The Greek New Testament</i> , 3d corrected ed., edited by K. Aland, M. Black, C. M. Martini, B. M. Metzger, and A. Wikgren (New York: United Bible Societies, 1983)
UBS ⁴	<i>The Greek New Testament</i> , 4th rev. ed., edited by B. Aland, K. Aland, J. Karavidopoulos, C. M. Martini, and B. M. Metzger (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft/United Bible Societies, 1993)

Hebrew Bible

Gen.	Genesis
Exod.	Exodus

Lev.	Leviticus
Num.	Numbers
Deut.	Deuteronomy
Josh.	Joshua
Judg.	Judges
Ruth	Ruth
1 Sam.	1 Samuel
2 Sam.	2 Samuel
1 Kings	1 Kings
2 Kings	2 Kings
1 Chron.	1 Chronicles
2 Chron.	2 Chronicles
Ezra	Ezra
Neh.	Nehemiah
Esth.	Esther
Job	Job
Ps.	Psalms
Prov.	Proverbs
Eccles.	Ecclesiastes
Song	Song of Songs
Isa.	Isaiah
Jer.	Jeremiah
Lam.	Lamentations
Ezek.	Ezekiel
Dan.	Daniel
Hos.	Hosea
Joel	Joel
Amos	Amos
Obad.	Obadiah
Jon.	Jonah
Mic.	Micah
Nah.	Nahum
Hab.	Habakkuk
Zeph.	Zephaniah
Hag.	Haggai
Zech.	Zechariah
Mal.	Malachi

Greek Testament

Matt.	Matthew
Mark	Mark
Luke	Luke
John	John
Acts	Acts
Rom.	Romans
1 Cor.	1 Corinthians
2 Cor.	2 Corinthians
Gal.	Galatians
Eph.	Ephesians
Phil.	Philippians
Col.	Colossians
1 Thess.	1 Thessalonians
2 Thess.	2 Thessalonians
1 Tim.	1 Timothy
2 Tim.	2 Timothy
Titus	Titus
Philem.	Philemon
Heb.	Hebrews
James	James
1 Pet.	1 Peter
2 Pet.	2 Peter
1 John	1 John
2 John	2 John
3 John	3 John
Jude	Jude
Rev.	Revelation

Other Jewish and Christian Writings

Adam and Eve	Books of Adam and Eve
Add. Esth.	Additions to Esther
Apoc. Abr.	Apocalypse of Abraham
Apoc. Dan.	Apocalypse of Daniel
Apoc. Elijah	Apocalypse of Elijah
Apoc. Mos.	Apocalypse of Moses
Apoc. Pet.	Apocalypse of Peter

Apoc. Zeph.	Apocalypse of Zephaniah
Asc. Isa.	Martyrdom and Ascension of Isaiah
As. Mos.	Assumption of Moses
Bar.	Baruch
2 Bar.	2 (Syriac Apocalypse of) Baruch
3 Bar.	3 (Greek Apocalypse of) Baruch
Barn.	Barnabas
Bel	Bel and the Dragon
<i>Bib. Ant.</i>	Pseudo-Philo, <i>Biblical Antiquities</i>
1–2 Clem.	1–2 Clement
Did.	Didache
Diogn.	Diognetus
<i>Eccl. Hist.</i>	Eusebius, <i>Ecclesiastical History</i>
1 Enoch	1 (Ethiopic) Enoch
2 Enoch	2 (Slavonic) Enoch
1 Esdr.	1 Esdras
2 Esdr.	2 Esdras
Herm. <i>Man.</i>	Shepherd of Hermas, <i>Mandate(s)</i>
Herm. <i>Sim.</i>	Shepherd of Hermas, <i>Similitude(s)</i>
Herm. <i>Vis.</i>	Shepherd of Hermas, <i>Vision(s)</i>
Ign. <i>Eph.</i>	Ignatius, <i>Letter to the Ephesians</i>
Ign. <i>Magn.</i>	Ignatius, <i>Letter to the Magnesians</i>
Ign. <i>Phld.</i>	Ignatius, <i>Letter to the Philadelphians</i>
Ign. <i>Rom.</i>	Ignatius, <i>Letter to the Romans</i>
Jdt.	Judith
Jos. As.	Joseph and Aseneth
Jub.	Jubilees
Let. Arist.	Letter of Aristeas
Let. Jer.	Letter of Jeremiah
1–4 Macc.	1–4 Maccabees
Mart. Pol.	Martyrdom of Polycarp
Odes Sol.	Odes of Solomon
Pol. <i>Phil.</i>	Polycarp, <i>Letter to the Philippians</i>
Pr. Azar.	Prayer of Azariah
Pr. Man.	Prayer of Manasseh
Ps. Sol.	Psalms of Solomon
Sib. Or.	Sibylline Oracles
Sir.	Sirach (Ecclesiasticus)

Sus.	Susanna
T. Abr.	Testament of Abraham
T. Asher	Testament of Asher
T. Ben.	Testament of Benjamin
T. Dan	Testament of Dan
T. Gad	Testament of Gad
T. Isaac	Testament of Isaac
T. Iss.	Testament of Issachar
T. Jacob	Testament of Jacob
T. Job	Testament of Job
T. Jos.	Testament of Joseph
T. Judah	Testament of Judah
T. Levi	Testament of Levi
T. Moses	Testament of Moses
T. Naph.	Testament of Naphtali
T. Reub.	Testament of Reuben
T. Sim.	Testament of Simeon
T. Sol.	Testament of Solomon
T. Zeb.	Testament of Zebulun
Tob.	Tobit
Wis.	Wisdom of Solomon

Josephus and Philo

<i>Abr.</i>	<i>On Abraham</i>
<i>Ag. Ap.</i>	<i>Against Apion</i>
<i>Alleg. Interp.</i>	<i>Allegorical Interpretation</i>
<i>Anim.</i>	<i>On Animals</i>
<i>Ant.</i>	<i>Jewish Antiquities</i>
<i>Chang. Nam.</i>	<i>On the Change of Names</i>
<i>Cher.</i>	<i>On the Cherubim</i>
<i>Conf. Tong.</i>	<i>On the Confusion of Tongues</i>
<i>Cont. Life</i>	<i>On the Contemplative Life</i>
<i>Creat.</i>	<i>On the Creation</i>
<i>Decal.</i>	<i>On the Decalogue</i>
<i>Dreams</i>	<i>On Dreams</i>
<i>Drunk.</i>	<i>On Drunkenness</i>
<i>Etern. World</i>	<i>On the Eternity of the World</i>
<i>Flacc.</i>	<i>Flaccus</i>

<i>Flight</i>	<i>On Flight and Finding</i>
<i>Gaius</i>	<i>On the Embassy to Gaius</i>
<i>Giants</i>	<i>On the Giants</i>
<i>Good Free</i>	<i>Every Good Person Is Free</i>
<i>Heir</i>	<i>Who Is the Heir of Divine Things</i>
<i>Husb.</i>	<i>On Husbandry</i>
<i>Hypoth.</i>	<i>Hypothetica/Apology for the Jews</i>
<i>Jos.</i>	<i>On Joseph</i>
<i>J.W.</i>	<i>The Jewish War</i>
<i>Life</i>	<i>The Life of Josephus</i>
<i>Migr. Abr.</i>	<i>On the Migration of Abraham</i>
<i>Mos.</i>	<i>On the Life of Moses</i>
<i>Plant.</i>	<i>On Noah's Work as a Planter</i>
<i>Post. Cain</i>	<i>On the Posterity and Exile of Cain</i>
<i>Prelim. Stud.</i>	<i>On the Preliminary Studies</i>
<i>Prov.</i>	<i>On Providence</i>
<i>Quest. Exod.</i>	<i>Questions and Answers on Exodus</i>
<i>Quest. Gen.</i>	<i>Questions and Answers on Genesis</i>
<i>Rewards</i>	<i>On Rewards and Punishments/On Curses</i>
<i>Sacr.</i>	<i>On the Sacrifices of Abel and Cain</i>
<i>Sobr.</i>	<i>On Sobriety</i>
<i>Spec. Laws</i>	<i>On the Special Laws</i>
<i>Unchang.</i>	<i>On the Unchangeableness of God</i>
<i>Virt.</i>	<i>On the Virtues</i>
<i>Worse Att. Bet.</i>	<i>The Worse Attacks the Better</i>

Rabbinic Tractates

The abbreviations below are used for the names of tractates in the Babylonian Talmud (indicated by a prefixed *b.*), Palestinian or Jerusalem Talmud (*y.*), Mishnah (*m.*), and Tosepta (*t.*).

Abod. Zar.	Aboda Zara
Abot	Abot
Arak.	Arakin
B. Bat.	Baba Batra //
B. Meş.	Baba Meşih //
B. Qam.	Baba Qamma //
Bek.	Bekorot
Ber.	Berakot
Beşa	Beşa

Bik.	Bikkurim
Dem.	Dema ד
E d.	E duyyot
E rub.	E rubin
Giṭ.	Giṭṭin
Ḥag.	Ḥagiga
Ḥal.	Ḥalla
Hor.	Horayot
Ḥul.	Ḥullin
Kel.	Kelim
Ker.	Keritot
Ketub.	Ketubot
Kil.	Kil ל ayim
Ma א ś.	Ma א śerot
Ma א ś. Š.	Ma א śer Šeni
Mak.	Makkot
Makš.	Makširin
Meg.	Megilla
Me א .	Me א a
Menah.	Menahot
Mid.	Middot
Miqw.	Miqwa ב t
Mo ב d Qaṭ.	Mo ב d Qaṭan
Nazir	Nazir
Ned.	Nedarim
Neg.	Nega ב m
Nid.	Nidda
O hol.	O holot
O r.	O rla
Para	Para
Pe א	Pe א
Pesaḥ.	Pesaḥim
Qid.	Qiddušin
Qin.	Qinnim
Ro ב Haš.	Ro ב Haššana
Šab.	Šabbat
Sanh.	Sanhedrin
Šeb.	Šebi א

Šebu.	Šebu Št
Šeqal.	Šeqalim
Soṭa	Soṭa
Suk.	Sukka
Ṭ. Yom	Ṭebul Yom
Ta An .	Ta An it
Tamid	Tamid
Tem.	Temura
Ter.	Terumot
Ṭohar.	Ṭoharot
U q.	U qṣin
Yad.	Yadayim
Yeb.	Yebamot
Yoma /	Yoma /
Zab.	Zabim
Zebaḥ.	Zebaḥim

Midrashim

Midrashim on the biblical books are indicated by the abbreviation Midr. appended in front of the usual abbreviation for the biblical book (see the above list). The names of other midrashim (e.g., *Sipra*, *Mekilta de Rabbi Ishmael*, *Pesiqta Rabbati*) are spelled in full.

Targumim

Targumim on the Writings and Prophets are indicated by the abbreviation Tg. appended in front of the usual abbreviation for the biblical book (see the above list). In the place of Tg., targumim on the Pentateuch use one of the following abbreviations:

Frg. Tg.	Fragmentary Targum
Tg. Neof. 1	Targum Neofiti 1
Tg. Onq.	Targum Onqelos
Tg. Ps.-J.	Targum Pseudo-Jonathan

Qumran / Dead Sea Scrolls

References follow the numbering system found in Florentino García Martínez, *The Dead Sea Scrolls Translated: The Qumran Texts in English*, 2d ed., translated by Wilfred G. E. Watson (Leiden: Brill; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996).

1QH	Thanksgiving Hymns/Psalms (<i>Hôdāyôt</i>); reference numbers in parentheses reflect the older eighteen-column division
1QM	War Scroll (<i>Milḥāmâ</i>)

1QpHab	Commentary (<i>Pesher</i>) on Habakkuk
1QS	Manual of Discipline (<i>Serek Hayyahad</i> , Rule/Order of the Community)
1QSa	Rule of the Congregation (1Q28a, appendix A to 1QS)
1QSB	Rule of the Blessings (1Q28b, appendix B to 1QS)
4QFlor	Florilegium (4Q174)
4QP Bless	Patriarchal Blessings (4Q252)
4QpGen ^a	Commentary (<i>Pesher</i>) on Genesis (4Q252)
4QpIsa ^d	Commentary (<i>Pesher</i>) on Isaiah (4Q164)
4QMMT	Halakhic Letter (<i>Miqsāt Maʿāsê Tôrâ</i>)
4QpPs ^a	Commentary (<i>Pesher</i>) on Psalms (A) (4Q171; formerly 4QpPs37)
4QŠirŠabb ^a	Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice (<i>Serek Šîrôt ʾĪlat Haššabbât</i>)
4QTest	Testimonia (4Q175)
5QNJ	Description of the New Jerusalem (5Q15)
11QMelch	Melchizedek text (11Q13)
11QTemple ^a	Temple Scroll (11Q19)
CD	Damascus Document

Greek Manuscripts

Sigla for Greek manuscripts and other text-critical abbreviations basically follow the pattern in UBS⁴, pages 4*–52*, and NA²⁷, pages 50*–76*. The original hand of a manuscript is indicated by an asterisk (ⲁ*), successive correctors by superscript numbers (Ⲃⲁ, Ⲃⲁ¹, etc.).

Greek Transliteration

α	a
β	b
γ	g (n)
δ	d
ε	e
ζ	z
η	ē
θ	th
ι	i
κ	k
λ	l
μ	m
ν	n
ξ	x
ο	o
π	p
ρ	r
σ ζ	s
τ	t
υ	y (u)
φ	ph
χ	ch
ψ	ps
ω	ō
’	h

Notes on the transliteration of Greek

1. Accents, lenis (smooth breathing), and *iota* subscript are not shown in transliteration.
2. The transliteration of asper (rough breathing) precedes a vowel or diphthong (e.g., ἄ = *ha*; αἶ = *hai*) and follows ρ (i.e., ῥ = *rh*).
3. *Gamma* is transliterated *n* only when it precedes γ, κ, ξ, or χ.
4. *Upsilon* is transliterated *u* only when it is part of a diphthong (i.e., αυ, ευ, ου, υι).

Hebrew Transliteration

א	ʾ	
ב	b	
ג	g	
ד	d	
ה	h	
ו	w	
ז	z	
ח	ḥ	
ט	ṭ	
י	y	
כ	k	
ל	l	
מ	m	
נ	n	
ס	s	
ע	ʿ	
פ	p	
צ	ṣ	
ק	q	
ר	r	
ש	ś	
ת	t	
אָ	ā	qāmeṣ
אַ	a	pataḥ
אֶ	a	furtive pataḥ
אֵ	e	sěgôl
אִ	ē	ṣērê
יִ	i	short ḥîreq

ְ	ī	long ḥîreq written defectively
ֶ	o	qāmeṣ ḥāṭûp
ֹ	ô	ḥôlem written fully
ֻ	ō	ḥôlem written defectively
ֺ	û	šûreq
ֽ	u	short qibbûṣ
ֻ	ū	long qibbûṣ written defectively
ְּ	â	final qāmeṣ hē (ְּ = āh)
ֵֿ	ê	sěgôl yôd (ֵֿ = êy)
ֶֿ	ê	şērê yôd (ֶֿ = êy)
ִֿ	î	ḥîreq yôd (ִֿ = îy)
ֹּ	ă	ḥāṭēp pataḥ
ֶּ	ě	ḥāṭēp sěgôl
ֹּ	ǒ	ḥāṭēp qāmeṣ
ְּ	ě	vocal šěwā
ְ	-	silent šěwā

Notes on the transliteration of Hebrew

1. Accents are not shown in transliteration.
2. Silent šěwa ְ is not indicated in transliteration.
3. The unaspirated forms of תּ פּ כּ בּ גּ are not specially indicated in transliteration.
4. *Dāgeš forte* is indicated by doubling the consonant. *Dāgeš* present for euphonious reasons is not indicated in transliteration.
5. *Maqqēp* is represented by a hyphen.

Introduction to Revelation

The Apocalypse is a difficult book to interpret, though easier on the whole than the Gospels. This is because there are few source-critical problems to fight through. The primary problems in studying the Apocalypse are four: the symbolism; the structure of the book; the debate among historicist, preterist, idealist, and futurist interpretations; and the use of the OT in the book. The function of the symbolism is greatly debated, especially in terms of its relation to the past (apocalyptic mind-set behind the book), present (the events of John's day), and future (future events in the history of the church or at the eschaton). This is, of course, closely related to the schools of interpretation regarding the book. The one area of general agreement among most commentators is that the background is to be found in the common apocalyptic world of John's day. No one has yet come up with any outline that approaches consensus. There are two further problems: the relation between the seals, trumpets, and bowls, and the lengthy interludes that interrupt the seals, trumpets, and bowls (7:1–17; 10:1–11:13; 12:1–14:20); these have not been adequately accounted for in current structural hypotheses.

The consensus interpretation among nonevangelicals is preterist. In the SBL (Society of Biblical Literature) seminar it is assumed that the book uses a future orientation not to describe future reality but to challenge the situation of the original readers. However, conclusions must come via study of the apocalyptic genre. Do ancient Near East, OT, and intertestamental apocalypses take a futuristic or a preterist point of view? I am convinced of two things: first that they are predominantly futuristic in perspective, and second that it is a disjunctive fallacy to take an either-or stance. A basic element in defining apocalyptic is its pessimism toward the present and the promise of restoration in a sovereignly controlled future. However, this does not mean that there is no preterist element, for the message regarding God's sovereignty over the future is intended to call the church in the present to perseverance, and many of the symbols in the Apocalypse are borrowed from the first-century situation, for example, the Roman Empire in chapters 17–18. The Antichrist and his forces are depicted as the final Roman Empire, but there is a twofold message in this: the current empire will be judged by God, and the final empire will be defeated and destroyed. In short, the book is both preterist and futurist in orientation.

The definitive work on the use of the OT in the Apocalypse has yet to be written. It has no actual quotation yet far more allusions than any other NT book. These allusions are as essential to understanding the book as the symbolism. Virtually every point made comes in some way via an OT allusion. Contrary to popular opinion, the Book of Daniel is not the key to the Apocalypse. Isaiah, Zechariah, and Ezekiel are found almost as often. The key interpretive element is typology. As in the Gospels with Jesus, now the current time of trouble and the final conflagration are presented as reliving and fulfilling the prophecies of the OT.

Authorship

Internal Evidence. The author of the book identifies himself as “John, the slave of (Jesus/God) . . . (exiled) on the island of Patmos” (1:1, 4, 9; 22:8), and he is the recipient of a series of visions sent from God for the churches of the Roman province of Asia. He is to provide prophetic “witness” to these churches of the message God is sending to them through him (1:2). Yet the identification of this “John” has led to centuries of disagreement on the part of scholars, for he never identifies

himself as the “apostle” but simply calls himself “slave” (1:1), “prophet” (1:3; 22:9), and one among his “brothers the prophets” (22:9; cf. 19:10). There have been several suggestions: (1) John the apostle; (2) the elder John; (3) John Mark; (4) John the Baptist; (5) another John; (6) Cerinthus; and (7) someone using the name of John the apostle as a pseudonym.

Three can be dismissed rather quickly. Dionysius the Great, bishop of Alexandria in the mid-third century, thought it possible that John Mark may have been the author but dismissed it as unlikely on historical grounds (Eusebius, *Eccl. Hist.* 7.25). The only one to suggest that John the Baptist was the author was Ford (1975b: 28–41, 50–56), who believed John and his followers produced it in three stages: first, chapters 4–11 as visions given to the Baptist before Jesus began his ministry; then, chapters 12–22 by one of his disciples before A.D. 70; and, finally, chapters 1–3 by a final editor. However, no one has followed her because it is difficult to explain how such a work on the periphery of Christianity would be accepted into the Christian canon. Also, the Gnostic Cerinthus was proposed by two groups who opposed the Montanists: the Alogoi of the late second century and Gaius, a Roman presbyter of the early third century. It seems their entire purpose was to oppose Montanism and the Book of Revelation that was so important to that movement. There is no serious evidence to suggest such a connection except that Cerinthus was a millenarian (see Aune 1997: liii).

External Evidence. Justin Martyr in the mid-second century wrote that the apostle John was the author (*Dialogue with Trypho* 81.4), and this became the accepted view (so also Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 4.20.11; Tertullian, *Against Marcion* 3.14.3; Clement of Alexandria, *Paedagogus* 2.108; Origen, *De principiis* 1.2.10). Helmbold (1961–62: 77–79) points out that the Apocryphon of John, a likely mid-to late-second-century work, also attributes the book to the apostle John. The first to reject apostolic authorship was Marcion, the second-century Gnostic who rejected all non-Pauline books (apart from an edited version of Luke) because of their Jewish influence. Dionysius also doubted the apostolic authorship of Revelation, and he was followed by Eusebius, Cyril of Jerusalem, and Chrysostom. Dionysius is particularly important because he was the first to develop a series of arguments for his position, focusing on three problems: the absence of a claim to be an apostle or eyewitness, the different structure and thought patterns of Revelation from the other Johannine writings, and the difficult Greek of the book (see below).

Dionysius believed that “another (unknown) John” wrote Revelation, and he pointed to two tombs at Ephesus said to be John’s as evidence (also the view of Sweet, Krodel, Wall, Aune; Beasley-Murray, *DLNT* 1033). A version of this view believes that John’s Gospel, the Johannine epistles, and the Apocalypse were all the product of a Johannine “school” or circle of prophets, perhaps originating with the apostle himself (so Brown, Culpepper, Schüssler Fiorenza). This is certainly a possibility but rests on the larger decision as to whether the differences between the Gospel and Revelation are so great as to demand separate authors (see below).

Eusebius, bishop of Caesarea, believed that the answer to the authorship of Revelation lay in Papias’s mention of “John the Elder”: “And if anyone chanced to come who had actually been a follower of the elders, what Andrew or what Peter said . . . or what John (said); and the things which Aristion and John the elder, disciples of the Lord, say” (*Eccl. Hist.* 3.39.2–4). Eusebius believed there were two Johns at Ephesus, with the apostle writing the Gospel and the elder the Apocalypse. However, two comments must be made. First, it is indeed possible that these are not two Johns but one, with the past “said” linking John with the apostles of the past and the present “say” linking him with those witnesses still alive in the time of Papias (so Smalley 1994: 38). Gundry (1982: 611–12) argues strongly that Papias equated John “the elder” with “the Lord’s disciple” on the grounds

that Papias was writing before A.D. 110 and was more likely referring to first-generation witnesses rather than second-generation elders. If he was speaking of the second generation, one would have expected him to speak of the elders receiving the traditions from the disciples. Therefore, Eusebius must have interpreted it as two different witnesses because of his own bias against Revelation, and Papias equated John the elder with John the apostle. Second, even if these were two separate Johns, there is no evidence that the one wrote the Gospel and the other the Apocalypse. This is a theory that cannot go beyond speculation.

Another common view (though more frequent in the 19th century) is that Revelation is a pseudonymous book, similar to others widely seen as written under the pseudonym of a famous “hero” (e.g., 2 Thessalonians, Ephesians, the Pastorals, 1-2 Peter). However, this does not fit the ancient apocalyptic characteristic that pseudonymous authors were long in the past. Moreover, one would expect a more explicit identification if a later writer were doing so, for example, “John the apostle” (so Beale 1999: 34). Also, it is uncertain whether pseudonymity was practiced in the early church (see Guthrie 1990: 1015–23; Carson, Moo, and Morris 1992: 367–71).

Differences from the Fourth Gospel. The primary reason why many scholars reject Revelation as a Johannine creation is the alleged differences from the Gospel of John. First, the Greek differs greatly. Guthrie (1990: 939) provides a good summary: the author “places nominatives in opposition to other cases, irregularly uses participles, constructs broken sentences, adds unnecessary pronouns, mixes up genders, numbers and cases and introduces several unusual constructions.” Several explanations are possible for the differences in Greek, however, such as an amanuensis who helped smooth out similar rough Greek in the Gospel, or (perhaps more likely) the apocalyptic form itself and the effects of the visions on John as he wrote. It is commonly conceded that there is a type of Hebraic Greek in the Apocalypse (so S. Thompson 1985 *passim*; Aune 1997: clxii; though see below on “Language”). Moreover, many of the solecisms appear deliberate, perhaps due to theological emphasis (see on 1:4) or the visionary experience. Such powerful experiences as the ecstatic visions would naturally affect one’s writing style. Thus after his extensive discussion of syntax and style, R. H. Charles (1920: 1.xxx–xxxvii) sees as many similarities as differences between John and Revelation.

More important are the so-called differences in theology between Revelation and the Fourth Gospel. The tone of the two books seems radically different, with the God of John a God of love who seeks the conversion of the “world” (e.g., John 3:16; cf. 1 John 4:9–10), while the God of Revelation is a God of wrath and judgment. Yet this is a false contrast, for judgment is also central to the Gospel (5:22, 30; 9:39), and in Revelation God also seeks repentance (see on 9:20–21; 14:6–7; 16:9, 11). Also, while John’s Gospel has a soteriology centering on belief and conversion, Revelation seemingly has no such purpose. I argue below (“Theology”), however, that there is a mission theology that does resemble that of the Fourth Gospel in some ways. Furthermore, certain terms common to both the Gospel and the Apocalypse are used differently, such as “lamb” or “Word.” Yet there may well be an apocalyptic as well as a paschal aspect to the “lamb” of John 1:29, 34 (see Carson 1991: 149). There is certainly a distinct difference between Jesus as the Word in John 1:1–2 (where he is the living revealer of God) and in Rev. 19:13 (where “his name is the Word of God” connotes the proclamation of judgment), but in both places λόγος (*logos*) connects Jesus with the Father and highlights the oneness between them. In fact, only in these two books is Jesus called λόγος in the NT. The differences are due to genre rather than authorship. Smalley (1988: 556–58) argues that the three main christological titles—Word, Lamb of God, and Son of Man—are so similar between the Gospel and the Apocalypse that they suggest unity of authorship. Similarly, the Spirit is the

“Paraclete” in John 14–16 but the “seven spirits of God” in Rev. 1:4; 3:1; 4:5; 5:6. Yet again the differences can be accounted for in the purposes of the two books. In the Gospel the Spirit is “another paraclete” following in the train of Jesus (14:16), while in the Apocalypse he is the perfect “sevenfold Spirit.” The function is quite similar, however, as the Spirit challenges the church and convicts the world in both works (cf. John 16:8–15 and Rev. 2:7; 5:6; etc.). Finally, the realized eschatology of John is seen to be incompatible with the final eschatology of Revelation; but it has long been recognized that the actual eschatology of the Gospel is inaugurated, with a final aspect in John 5:28–29 and 14:2–3, and again the differences are the result more of emphasis than final content.

The problems of the authorship of Revelation are indeed formidable, for the author makes no explicit identification of himself with John the apostle, and there are distinct differences between it and the Fourth Gospel (the authorship of which is also widely debated). Yet there are good reasons for upholding the viability of Revelation as penned by the apostle John and for downplaying the differences between it and the Fourth Gospel. First, there is sufficient evidence of acceptance from the early church fathers (Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Tertullian, Clement of Alexandria) to support apostolic authorship. Second, the similarities between the Gospel and the Apocalypse are sufficient to support that decision. The only two books in the NT to argue for the deity of Christ on the basis of the “oneness motif” between God and Jesus are John and the Apocalypse (see below on “Theology”). Also, there is a similar mission theme between them, as God seeks to bring the world to repentance. Mounce (1998: 14) mentions that Zech. 12:10 is quoted in John 19:37 and Rev. 1:7 “using the same Greek verb (*ekkenteō*), which in turn is not used by the LXX and is found nowhere else in the NT.” Ozanne (1965) finds a series of terms common to John and the Apocalypse: “conquer,” “keep the word,” “keep the commandments,” “dwell,” “sign,” “witness,” “true”; and Swete (1911: cxxx) concludes that the linguistic and grammatical data support a close affinity between John’s Gospel and the Apocalypse. In short, the internal evidence supports the external witness of the earliest fathers; and of the options noted above, Johannine authorship makes the best sense.

Date

Carson, Moo, and Morris (1992: 473–74) state that four dates were proposed by early Christian writers: the reigns of Claudius (A.D. 41–54, by Epiphanius), Nero (A.D. 54–68, by the Syriac versions), Domitian (A.D. 81–96, by Irenaeus, Victorinus, Eusebius, Clement of Alexandria, Origen), and Trajan (A.D. 98–117, by Donotheus, Theophylact). Of these, most contemporary scholars opt for either Nero or Domitian. Aune (1997: lvii) points out that the Domitianic date prevailed from the second through the eighteenth centuries and again in the twentieth century, while the Neronian date dominated the nineteenth century (Aune himself believes that the first edition appeared in the 60s and the final in the mid-90s). To determine which view is best, several issues must be discussed.

Emperor Worship/Imperial Cult. It is clear in Revelation that one of the primary problems of the believers in the province of Asia is some form of emperor worship (13:4, 14–17; 14:9; 15:2; 16:2; 19:20; 20:4). In the Roman world this began early on with the deification of Julius Caesar and Augustus, followed by Claudius and Vespasian. But the practice was to deify the emperor after he died rather than to worship a living emperor. Caligula demanded to be worshiped, but he was not recognized as divine by the senate. Tiberius and Claudius refused deification while they were alive. More important for the issue here is that Nero was not deified, though there is some evidence that he wished to be. However, there was no widespread demand that he be recognized as such.

Domitian may have wished to be recognized as *deus praesens* (present deity) and to be called “our lord and god,” and coins show him enthroned as “father of the gods” (Jones, ABD 5:807). To be sure, as Giesen (1997: 28–30) states, the emperor was seen not so much as a god but more as the earthly representative of the gods, a mediator between the gods and the people. Yet this role was popularly seen as divine, as evidenced by the temples and idolatrous images/statues. But this theory regarding Domitian’s demand to be recognized as a god has been challenged by L. Thompson (1990: 101–15; so also Warden 1991: 207–8, 210–11), who argues that Domitian’s critics (Pliny, Tacitus, Suetonius, Dio Cassius) were biased against him and so painted him in a bad light because it was politically expedient to do so in the early years of Trajan. Thus Domitian was not a megalomaniac but was on the whole a good emperor beloved by his provincial subjects. There was no true persecution of the church during his reign.

However, Beale (1999: 6–12) argues that Thompson has overstated his case, and that while there was no policy regarding worshiping Domitian as a god, the title was expected as a form of flattery and that the negative evaluation of his reign has some basis in fact. Indeed, Janzen (1994: 643–49) points out that the coins of the 90s prove Domitian’s megalomania; they show that even his wife was called the mother of the divine Caesar. While it is debated how much persecution was attributable to a refusal to participate in the imperial cult, some limited persecution did probably occur. However these issues are resolved, the imperial cult was apparently much more developed and prominent in Domitian’s day than it was in Nero’s time. Botha (1988: 87–91) states that there was no single “imperial cult” but rather each city developed its own rituals. While the cult was voluntary, it was part of the benefactor system, with the emperor especially chosen by the gods and thus a portent of deity that should be worshiped. As such it gave great stability to the empire and was a sign of the status quo of Pax Romana. This reappraisal of Domitian’s role is summarized by Slater (1998: 234–38): the evidence does show that Domitian was loved by the people in the provinces because he curbed the economic exploitation caused by the governors, and as a result the elite disliked Domitian. Also, historians like Pliny, Tacitus, and Suetonius did write under Trajan when it was politically advantageous to exalt the new dynasty at the expense of the Flavians (Vespasian, Titus, and especially Domitian). But there is still good evidence for the growth of the imperial cult under Domitian’s reign. This evidence is provided by Biguzzi (1998a: 280–89): Asia was the epicenter of the imperial cult, and cities competed for the privilege of erecting a temple. In 29 B.C. Pergamum was the first to erect a temple, and Smyrna the second in A.D. 21 after a vigorous competition. Ephesus was the third, and it was especially linked with establishing the Flavian dynasty in Asia. A seven-meter statue of Titus (some think Domitian) was erected in the temple, and worship of the emperor was meant to bind the province of Asia together under the Pax Romana. Brent (1999: 101–2) believes that John was seen as the counterpart to the *theologos* or pagan official who guided the ritual, with Revelation the counter to the mysteries of Roman idolatry. While this is overstated, the importance of the imperial cult for Revelation will be noted often in the commentary.

Persecution of Christians. Revelation speaks of a certain stability in the situation of the churches but yet a fair amount of persecution (so 1:9; 2:2–3, 9–10, 13; 3:8, 10). Most of the persecution was Jewish (2:9; 3:9), however, and the martyrdom of Antipas (2:13) was in the past. There is little evidence in the book for official Roman persecution at the time of writing, and only two of the letters mention affliction (Smyrna and Thyatira), although the letter to Philadelphia presupposes it. The perspective of the book is that most of the oppression is yet to come (6:9–11; 12:11; 13:7, 10, 15; 16:6; 17:6; 18:24; 19:2; 20:4). A number of scholars have questioned the evidence for official

persecution under Domitian (Yarbro Collins 1984: 69–73; L. Thompson 1990: 105–9), and the general feeling is that very little had yet occurred (Aune 1997: lxiv–lxix; Barr 1998: 165–69). Thus Bell (1979: 96–97) believes that this favors a date around A.D. 68 following Nero’s death, arguing that Nero is the fifth emperor in 17:9–11 (with Galba the sixth—see on that passage). But the prophetic stance of the book regarding imminent persecution (if it is written during Domitian’s reign) did come to pass, as Pliny’s correspondence with Trajan in A.D. 110 demonstrates (Pliny, *Letters* 10.26–27, reproduced in Barr 1998: 166–68). L. Thompson and Aune argue again that the reports of widespread persecution in Tacitus, Suetonius, and others were the result of “a relatively tight circle of politician-writers associated with the senatorial aristocracy with which Domitian was frequently in conflict” (Aune 1997: lxvii). Thus he may have been placed in an unfairly harsh light for political reasons. If this is true (see also the previous section), the intense persecution under Nero could provide a better setting, for there is absolute evidence of a terrible persecution instigated when Nero blamed Christians for the burning of Rome to shift the blame from himself (A.D. 64–68). Wilson (1993: 604–5; see also Lipiński 1969; and Moberly 1992: 376–77) argues for a pre-A.D. 70 date on three grounds: the only true persecution occurred under Nero; the “one who is” in 17:10 is either Galba or Nero; and the temple was still standing according to 11:1–2. But the Neronian persecution was limited to Rome as far as the data tell us, and there is no evidence for it extending to the province of Asia at that time. Also, 11:1–2 is symbolic and does not demand a literal temple.

Moreover, the data does not show that there was no persecution, only that it was not as yet instigated officially from Rome. Also, such problems were beginning in the time of Domitian. First Clem. 1.1 (late 1st century) speaks of “sudden and repeated calamities” that had fallen upon the church, and in 7.1 Clement says “we are in the same arena, and the same struggle [as in the time of the martyrdom of Peter and Paul] is before us” (see Beale 1999: 13). In addition, the increasing public expectation of participation in the imperial cult described above would make such persecution likely. DeSilva (1992: 274–77) points out that while no evidence of widespread persecution exists, the relation between the state and Roman religious life put tremendous pressure on all citizens to participate in the official religion. Every aspect of civic life, from the guilds to commerce itself, was affected. Also, Asia Minor was known for its pro-Roman zeal, especially in terms of the imperial cult. Therefore, the relationship of Christians to the imperial cult there was a decisive test, and local persecution was likely. Reddish (1988: 85) goes so far as to describe the church there as “threatened by official persecution and martyrdom.” But Ford (1990: 144–46; 1993: 246–47) is closer to the truth that this is not systematic persecution under Domitian but the daily oppression and social ostracism that resulted from Christians refusing to participate in the life of the Roman cult. In an earlier work L. Thompson (1986: 147–49) points out that the theme of tribulation dominates several of the visions and even attributes this to a sociopolitical situation stemming from pagan persecution. This seems more likely than his later view. Slater (1998: 240–48, 251) notes that while the primary emphasis in the seven letters is on internal problems, three passages deal with the external difficulties (2:8–11, 13; 3:8–10) and all center on persecution. This can also be demonstrated in the great NT emphasis on the problem of persecution (Acts 24:5; 28:22; 2 Cor. 4:17; 1 Thess. 2:14–16; 1 Pet. 2:20; 4:12–5:11) and the emphasis on suffering in Revelation itself. Finally, Roman authors like Tacitus, Suetonius, and Pliny show how despised Christians were. In short, persecution is a major aspect of the book; while the emphasis on persecution can fit either Nero or Domitian, and while there are problems with both views, the Domitianic date provides a slightly better fit for the data.

Background of the Churches. The historical references to the situation of the churches in the seven letters (chaps. 2–3) must also be considered. It is this aspect that first convinced me to change my earlier view of a Neronian date. Several authors (Hemer 1986: 4–5; Guthrie 1990: 948–55; Aune 1997: lx–lxv) note events reflected in the letters that point to a later date than the 60s: (1) the unaided recovery of Laodicea (3:17) best fits the earthquake and subsequent reconstruction of the city in A.D. 80; (2) their great wealth reflects better the 90s than the 60s; (3) “do not harm the oil and the wine” (6:6) most likely refers to an edict of Domitian in A.D. 92 restricting the growing of vines in Asia; (4) the “synagogues of Satan” (2:9; 3:9) can best be situated in conflicts that took place under Domitian; (5) the church of Smyrna (2:8–11) may not have existed in the 60s; (6) the idea of the beast’s “mortal wound that is healed” (13:3, 12, 14) may well reflect the Nero redivivus legend that developed in the 80s and 90s. Of course, these can also be interpreted to fit a date in the 60s, and two aspects could favor the earlier date: (1) if the temple of 11:1–2 is to be taken literally it could favor a pre-A.D. 70 date, when the Jerusalem temple was still standing; and (2) if the eight kings of 17:9–11 are Roman emperors and one begins with Augustus (the first one named emperor), the sixth king who “is” would be Galba, who reigned A.D. 68–69. So the data is not conclusive, but altogether the later date better fits the historical background (see on 11:1–2 and 17:9–11 for answers to both these aspects).

All in all, the date must remain uncertain. Good arguments can be made for an origin under either Nero or Domitian. When all the data is examined and the two options are considered, however, it seems probable that a date in the mid-90s under Domitian has better evidence (for a good brief summary of this position, see Giesen 1997: 41–42).

Social Setting and Purpose

One’s conclusion regarding the imperial cult and the extent of persecution (discussed under “Date”) makes a great deal of difference in terms of one’s conclusion about the social situation behind the book. For instance, Yarbrow Collins (1984: 141–60; cf. also L. Thompson 1990: 27–28) believes that there was little persecution, so the feelings of alienation were within the Christians rather than imposed from outside. The people did not perceive the crisis, so the apocalypticist was trying to awaken their understanding to the actual situation. Thus the details of the visions were intended to heighten their awareness and then to draw them to the transcendent reality through which they could face the situation. Yarbrow Collins (1981b: 4–7) finds four areas of social tension within this crisis: church and synagogue, the Christian in a pagan society, hostility toward Rome, and rich versus poor. Thus the purpose (Yarbrow Collins 1992a: 302–5) is the struggle against the “economic exploitation and cultural imperialism” of Rome. The apocalypse constructs a symbolic universe under the control of God with true Christians as God’s priests who do not bow to Roman pressure and become God’s rulers in his future reign. L. Thompson (1986: 169–70) says that their identification with the crucified king separated them from society. Thus the author created a “feed-back loop” by developing an alternative symbolic world in which they were the victors.

Similarly, Barr (1998: 178–80) believes that the intention of the book was to provide a “mythic therapy” that transforms the perspectives of the readers and reorders their world by enabling them to assimilate Christ’s defeat of the dragon and thereby find victory in the struggle between “Roman culture and Christian conviction.” Thus it provides a “catharsis” (Barr 1984: 49–50) that gives the readers a new worldview in which the victims become the victors. For Schüssler Fiorenza (1985: 187–99) the key is the “rhetorical strategy” of the book, as a new “symbolic universe” is opened up that enables the readers to enter that world and alienate themselves from Roman power

and accept the “deprivation and destitution” that goes with it. They do this by the construction of a new social reality in the book, a world of future possibility in the midst of present oppression, a world where God is supreme. Kraybill (1999: 37–38) states that the problem is not persecution but compromise. Too many Christians had gotten “cozy with a pagan world,” and so the book calls them to choose allegiance to Christ or to the emperor. Le Grys (1992: 77–79) says the issue is not external but internal, a crisis of prophetic authority. The warnings relate to the future, namely the danger of the opponents, the Nicolaitans (2:6), and their influence on Christian compromise. In a similar vein Giesen (1996b: 61–63; 1997: 34–36) argues that the book is not encouraging as much as warning against the insidious nature of the imperial cult, telling Christians not to associate with it. The danger is not martyrdom but attraction to the pagan world. Koester (1992: 248–49) summarizes this approach by noting three threats: seduction by a false teaching that calls for assimilation to the Roman culture; conflict with the local synagogue and the threat of being denounced to the local authorities; and complacency due to prosperity (especially in Sardis and Laodicea).

These depictions of the social world described in the book contain a great deal of truth. However, there is also much more to it than this. It is clear that the seven churches were in a hostile environment from two directions—the Jewish world and the Roman world. The “synagogue of Satan” (2:9; 3:9) had turned against them. Relations between church and synagogue, never good from the start, deteriorated in the last couple of decades of the first century, and Revelation reflects that situation. Judaism had a special privilege that the Romans allowed only them, freedom from worshiping the Roman gods and participating in the Greco-Roman cults. Christianity was considered part of Judaism at least through the Jewish War (A.D. 66–70) and also benefited from this privilege. However, Judaism tried more and more to separate itself from Christianity and get the Roman Empire to recognize that Christianity was not exempt. This probably caused some of the pressure reflected in the book. Bredin (1998: 161–64) points to the Judean tax that the Romans imposed on Jews for the rebuilding of the Capitoline temple. It was this tax that allowed the Jews freedom from participation in the imperial cult. Christians refused to pay this tax; thus the Jews denounced Christians as not being true Judeans and as being troublemakers.

While there was no official Roman persecution, Christians felt a great deal of economic and social pressure to participate in Roman life, including the trade guilds with their idolatrous feasts and cultic practices as well as the imperial cult. Beale (1999: 30) describes the pressure to compromise with the guilds, especially the annual feast honoring each guild’s patron deities as well as the emperor (the Nicolaitan cult gave in to these pressures). When Christians refused to do so, a great deal of antipathy was naturally directed against them. This situation is reflected in the seven letters, in the “affliction” they were experiencing (2:9), and in the imminent intensification of that affliction to the point of imprisonment and death (2:10; cf. 13:10). While there is no developed persecution in the book, there was a great deal of daily opposition as well as signs of intensification on the near horizon.

Therefore, Yarbro Collins’s thesis overstates the situation. There is more than a perceived crisis, for difficulties have actually begun. Still, her basic point is correct, for Revelation presents a counterreality to the prevailing reality of the Roman world, a transcendent realm in which the people of God are part of a counterculture and are willing to suffer for it. As deSilva (1992: 301–2) points out, the church is called on to maintain its *communitas* in the midst of societal pressure and alienation, to resist temptation for compromise and accommodation to society. For him (1993: 56–57) the worldview is a new set of standards apart from the Roman majority that not only resists

accommodation but embraces rejection by society in allegiance to Christ. Thus he calls the book an “honor discourse” (1998a: 80–87) written to persuade the readers to take action against pressures to conform to pagan ways, encouraging the faithful to persevere, and warning the weak against compromise. Yet it must be added that John also writes to encourage the persecuted believers to remain true and to promise them that God would vindicate them for their suffering.

Apocalyptic Genre and Mind-Set

It is universally recognized that Revelation is composed of three genres:^[1] apocalyptic, prophecy, and letter (in the order of the terms in 1:1–4; so Carson, Moo, and Morris 1992: 478, following Beasley-Murray). Yet Barr (1986: 244–50) argues strongly that the book is not just literary but oral, seen in the techniques of numbering (7, 3, 2), place and image (heaven-earth, the churches), the voices (angels, prophets) that carry messages for Jesus, and so on. He believes it was meant to be read in a lengthy liturgical service, probably as part of the eucharistic celebration. Thus the primary theme is proper worship of God.

Still, the three genres are critical (see Mathewson 1992: 206–7). Helpful but least important is that it is an epistle. The formula “John to the seven churches . . . grace and peace” (1:4–5) uncharacteristically follows the prologue, but there is also a brief benediction at the close (22:21) to show that John considers this a letter and not just a treatise. Moreover, the seven letters of chapters 2–3 are written to specific churches and show that the visions are addressing problems that the churches are currently experiencing. Aune (1997: lxxii, following Vanni) believes that the epistolary character of the book was partially intended “to facilitate its reading within the setting of Christian worship.” He also points out (lxxiii–lxxxiv) that it was common in the ancient world to encase divine revelation and proclamations of judgment in a “prophetic letter.” The value of this identification cannot be overstated—it helps the reader to realize that the book is not just a casebook for identifying future events but more a theological workbook addressing the church in the present through the prophecies of the future. John expected his readers to see themselves and their current situation through the lens of this book and to realize that as the church of the last days, they were corporately identified with the church at the end of the age.

It is impossible to distinguish ultimately between prophecy and apocalyptic, for the latter is an extension of the former (see Ladd 1957: 192–200; Bauckham 1993a: 2 calls it “apocalyptic prophecy”). Certain differences do in part distinguish the two forms: prophecy tends to be oracular and apocalyptic visionary, and prophecy has a certain optimistic overtone (if the nation repents, the judgment prophecies will not occur), while apocalyptic tends to be pessimistic (the only hope lies in the future rather than the present). However, both center on salvation for the faithful and judgment for the unfaithful. John calls his work a prophecy (1:3; 22:7, 10, 18, 19), and he was probably the leader of a group of prophets who ministered to the churches of Asia (22:6, 9). John was commissioned to his prophetic ministry in a way reminiscent of Ezekiel (10:8–11; see Ezek. 2:8–3:3); his ministry was described as prophesying “against many peoples, nations, languages, and kings” (Rev. 10:11). First-person prophetic oracles addressed to the churches from Jesus through John are found in 1:8, 17; 16:15; 22:7, 18–19. The letters to the churches are in third-person form (Jesus as “the one who”) but also contain prophetic material, especially in the call to hear and the promise to the overcomers. The value of recognizing the prophetic nature of the book underscores that John is not merely producing his own epistle (like Paul or Peter) but is the prophetic channel of a message directly from God and Christ. The origin of this book is not his fertile imagination but God himself. Some (e.g., Giesen 1997: 24–34) believe this is primarily a

prophetic book. Schüssler Fiorenza (1980: 121–28) sums up the issue well: Revelation is “a literary product of early Christian prophecy” that took place in Asia Minor and was influenced by the post-Pauline ideas of that part of the church. At the same time, it is also the product of early Christian apocalyptic traditions as taught by the prophetic circle led by John.

Revelation is of course best known as apocalyptic,^[2] though certain aspects of apocalyptic are not true of the book—it is not pseudonymous (Jones 1968: 326–27 thinks this is enough to declassify Revelation as apocalyptic), and ultimate victory is not centered just on the future intervention of God but on the “past sacrifice of Jesus Christ, ‘the Lamb that was slain’” (5:5; 7:14; 12:11; cf. Carson, Moo, and Morris 1992: 479). Still, J. Collins (1977b: 330–37) argues correctly that the similarities between Revelation and Jewish apocalyptic are too close, and the basic definition of apocalyptic fits the book well:

Apocalyptic entails the revelatory communication of heavenly secrets by an otherworldly being to a seer who presents the visions in a narrative framework; the visions guide readers into a transcendent reality that takes precedence over the current situation and encourages readers to persevere in the midst of their trials. The visions reverse normal experience by making the heavenly mysteries the real world and depicting the present crisis as a temporary, illusory situation. This is achieved via God’s transforming the world for the faithful. (Osborne 1991: 222)

Apocalyptic is both a formal type of literature and a mind-set of the group that follows the apocalyptic beliefs. The literature (for an excellent discussion of these works, see L. Thompson 1990: 19–22) flourished from 200 B.C. to A.D. 100. Yet there were also biblical prototypes like Isa. 24–27, Ezek. 37–39, Zechariah, and especially Daniel (for the origins of apocalyptic, see Osborne 1991: 232–34). In Revelation most of these features are present, especially the form of visions set in a narrative framework. While scholars debate the exact plot structure of the book, none doubts that such a structure exists. There are several “otherworldly journeys” by the author, for example, the throne room vision in chapters 4–5 or the heavenly visions of chapters 7, 14, 19, 21–22. There is an angelic mediator who guides the seer through the images and functions as interpreter (5:5; 7:13–14; 11:1–2; 17:6b–18; 21:9–22:11; cf. Ezek. 40; Zech. 1; Apoc. Abr. 10). Through this angel key elements of the visions are explained, and these become hermeneutical keys for understanding the rest. There are also discourse cycles in which recapitulation controls the narrative flow (the seals, trumpets, and bowls; see below) and a distinctive use of the OT as typological symbol. The esoteric symbolism demands a separate section (below) but is a key element in apocalyptic writings. Royalty (1997: 601–3) and Johns (1998: 763–68) discuss the rhetorical strategy of the Apocalypse and argue that it is primarily epideictic, that is, an attempt to challenge and change the worldview of the readers through praise and blame. The author is trying to persuade the members of the seven churches to recognize the situation and act on it, to change their values accordingly (deliberative rhetoric). The strategy employed was to wake them up by giving “praise to the Lamb and invective against the beasts and the whore of Rome to move his readers to embrace his values” (Johns 1998: 784).

There is also an apocalyptic mind-set. The fundamental perspective of the book is the exhortation to endure persecution on the basis of the transcendent reality of God’s kingdom in the present as grounded in God’s control of the future. Therefore the temporal world of temptation and pressure to conform to secular demands can be endured when one realizes that God is “the one who is and who was and who is to come” (1:4b), that is, the same God who controlled the past and will control the future is still in control the present, even though it does not seem like it. The judgment of the wicked and the vindication of the saints are important elements in apocalyptic and dominate Revelation as well. In light of this, the ethical mandate to persevere or overcome is

essential, for apocalyptic is ethical at heart and demands faithfulness on the part of the people of God. The recurring theme of the letters is repentance, for only this makes it possible to be an overcomer. The basis of it all is the determinism of the book. God is triumphant; he is “Lord God Almighty” (1:8; 4:8; 11:17; 15:3; 16:7, 14; 19:6, 15; 21:22), the one who is omnipotent and in control of all things. The so-called dualism of the book is only partial, for while the battle between good and evil dominates, it is not an equal battle. Satan has already been defeated at the cross, and even the death of the saints (13:7) becomes their triumph over him (12:11).

Interpretation of the Symbols

Obviously, interpretation is the heart of the issue. Approaches believing that to read a biblical book is automatically to understand it still dominate inductive Bible studies today. However, that view can rarely get back to the original meaning of a book, especially Revelation. As Friesen (1995: 306–14) says, we must wed social history to the text itself, that is, allow the real social situation to inform our understanding. That is especially true of the use of symbols in the book. Schüssler Fiorenza (1986: 125–30) says the symbols have a special communicative function in addressing the social world of the original readers, thus opening up a new symbolic world for them. It is our task to uncover that symbolic world. When I was in high school, Revelation was my favorite book, and I was an avid follower of the “prophecy school” of interpretation. So I took the “newspaper approach” and looked for all the current events that “fulfilled” the symbols of Revelation and the other apocalyptic portions of the Bible. I believed that limestone was being quarried in Indiana to rebuild the temple and that there was a computer in Belgium called “the Beast” that would help the Antichrist (who would arise from Lebanon and take over the European Commonwealth and then the world). The problem with all of this was twofold: none of the rumors happened to be true, and the entire approach was hermeneutically very weak. It is highly unlikely that God gave these visions to speak only to Christians of the last fifty years or so (after Israel became a nation). There is a false dichotomy between “literal” and “symbolic” in many circles. Those who call themselves literal are only selective in doing so. For Hal Lindsay and others the locust plague refers to helicopters, the demonic horsemen to tanks, and the many-headed beast is a world leader who will be quite distinguished looking. Elements like the lion and the lamb of chapter 5, the golden censer of chapter 8, the swallowed scroll of chapter 10, and the woman of chapter 12 must be taken symbolically. Every interpreter must ask the same two questions: What does each symbol portray in the literal world of history, and what background knowledge do I utilize to determine its meaning?

Beale (1999: 50–52) argues that John deliberately uses *ἐσήμανεν* (*esēmanen*, made known, the verb cognate of the noun “sign” in John’s Gospel) in 1:1 because of its parallels with Dan. 2:28–30, 45, where God “signifies” truths through pictorial or symbolic visions. Thus it means to “communicate by symbols” and connotes the need to interpret the reality behind the symbol. Revelation is a symbolic book, but that does not mean the symbols do not depict literal events, like the “great tribulation” (7:14) as well as the various depictions of the “three and a half” years in chapters 11–13 as symbols for the final period of history or the “beast” for the Antichrist. It is likely that God has chosen esoteric symbols from the common store of apocalyptic symbols in the first century in order to turn the reader away from exactly what he is going to do and toward the theological meaning of how he is going to do it. We do not know what is going to happen behind the pictures of locust plagues, meteor showers, volcanic eruptions, and horrible storms. Some may happen literally, many will not. It is important to realize that we know no more about the

second coming than Jesus' Jewish disciples did about the first. They too thought they were reading the Scriptures rightly.

Thus in interpreting the symbols of the book, we first need the “hermeneutics of humility” to realize we “see things imperfectly as in a poor mirror” (1 Cor. 13:8 NLT). We are to center on the purpose of the text and note the theological thrust, leaving what will actually happen with God. Moreover, we no longer need to guess what modern events may be prophesied, for every symbol was understandable to the first-century reader. Therefore, we seek the “language of equivalents” and use background knowledge from the first century to unlock the tensive symbols and to see what the original readers would have understood when they read them. This is not a perfect science, of course, and scholars debate the background behind each symbol. Beale (1999: 52–53) speaks of four levels of communication: the linguistic level, comprising the exegetical study of the text; the visionary level, considering John's experience; the referential level, centering each symbol in its historical referent; and the symbolic level, asking what is connoted by each symbol. Symbols are metaphorical utterances that are meant to be understood first pictorially and then referentially. There is a referential dimension to metaphor (see Soskice 1985: 51–53), but we find the meaning through the picture that is connoted. The sources for interpreting them come from the OT, intertestamental literature, and the Greco-Roman world—in other words, in the common world of the original readers in the province of Asia. We have to sift the various possibilities and see which background best fits the context. For instance, the twelve jewels that are the foundation stones of the New Jerusalem in 21:18–21 have been variously identified as the signs of the zodiac or the jewels on the ephod of the high priest (Philo and Josephus combined the two and believed the jewels on the ephod were the signs of the zodiac). In the context the signs of the zodiac are unlikely (the theme does not fit well and there are too many differences in the lists), and the jewels on the breastplate are closer to the list in the text (see the discussion of that passage). It probably connotes a priestly aspect and the magnificence of the city.

To illustrate this, let us consider the meaning of numbers in the book (see Bauckham 1993b: 29–37; Giesen 1997: 33; Beale 1999: 58–64). There are four major numbers from which the vast majority of numbers derive—4, 7, 10, 12. While some (Seiss, Walvoord, Thomas) tend to consider them literally, they are forced to some creative interpretations, for example, regarding the 144,000 who are sealed in 7:4–8. Walvoord (1966: 143) believes this means that 12,000 of those converted out of each tribe will be kept alive through the tribulation period, while Thomas (1992: 478) believes the 12,000 sealed in each tribe are those selected to be God's special witnesses through the tribulation period. But it seems more likely that the numbers in the book are meant symbolically, as was common in ancient apocalypses. Each of the numbers tends to signify wholeness or completeness throughout Scripture, as in the four corners of the earth or the four winds, the use of seven throughout Scripture, or the twelve tribes and twelve apostles. Bauckham (1993b: 29–37) has done an extensive study of the language of the book and has shown how often terms and ideas occur four times (four corners [7:1; 20:8]; four winds [7:1]; fourfold division of creation [8:7–8; 14:7; 16:2–3]; fourfold designation of the nations [see below]; “the one who lives forever and ever” [4:9, 10; 10:6; 15:7]) or seven times (the seven spirits; sevenfold doxologies; seven seals, trumpets, and bowls; seven beatitudes; several titles of God [Lord God Almighty, the one who sits on the throne] or Christ [Christ; Jesus—14 times; Jesus as “witness;” Christ's “coming;” Lamb—28 times]; the nations as “peoples, tribes, languages, and nations”; the Spirit—14 times; prophecy) in the book. As Bauckham (1993b: 35–36) concludes, all these cannot merely be coincidental. It seems likely that John has written his book carefully to signify the perfect plan of God and the completeness of his

work. This does not mean that no number can be literal. There were of course twelve tribes and twelve apostles, but even that number was chosen by God for theological reasons. We cannot insist on a literal meaning for the three and a half years of the tribulation period or the thousand years of the millennium. They could be literal, but the numbers function symbolically in the book and probably signify a lengthy period of time that is under God's control.

Methods of Interpretation

Perhaps more than for any other book, our understanding of the meaning of Revelation depends on the hermeneutical perspective we bring to bear on it. For instance, does the beast of chapters 11 and 13 refer to Nero, world empires, the pope (the view of the Protestant Reformers), Hitler, or a future Antichrist? Is the three and a half years of 11:2–3; 12:6, 14; and 13:9 the destruction of Jerusalem, the church age, or a final period of “tribulation” at the end of history? These and other issues depend on which method of interpretation one chooses. But how does one choose among the interpretive options? There is a twofold answer: study ancient apocalyptic literature and see which best fits the genre as a whole, but especially let the details of Revelation itself guide you to the proper method.^[3] There are, of course, many different ways to define the interpretive schools.^[4] However, most scholars summarize the options under four headings.

Historicist. This approach began with Joachim of Fiore in the twelfth century. He claimed that a vision had told him the 1,260 days of the Apocalypse prophesied the events of Western history from the time of the apostles until the present. The Franciscans followed Joachim and like him interpreted the book as relating to pagan Rome and the papacy (due to corruption in the church). Later the Reformers (e.g., Luther and Calvin) also favored this method, with the pope as the Antichrist (see Beckwith 1919: 327–29; Johnson 1981: 409). Classical dispensational thinking took this approach with regard to the letters to the seven churches, believing that the letters prophesied the seven periods of the church age.^[5] Also, the so-called prophecy movement, those preachers who see every detail in OT as well as NT apocalyptic symbolism as fulfilled in current events (the “newspaper approach” to prophecy), would be aligned with this school. Proponents of this method have tended to take Rev. 2–19, including the seals, trumpets, and bowls as well as the interludes, as prophetic of salvation history, that is, the development of church history within world history. Thus the beast/Antichrist has been variously identified with the pope, Napoleon, Mussolini, or Hitler. Because of its inherent weaknesses (its identification only with Western church history, the inherent speculation involved in the parallels with world history, the fact that it must be reworked with each new period in world history, the total absence of any relevance for John or his original readers; see also Beale 1999: 46), few scholars today take this approach.

Preterist. This approach argues that the details of the book relate to the present situation in which John lived rather than to a future period. Thus the symbols refer to events in the first-century world as experienced by the original readers, and John is telling them how God would deliver them from their oppressors. There are three basic approaches to the book from within this school of thought. The two most popular relate the book to the situation of the church in the Roman Empire. The first (taken by critical scholars like R. H. Charles, Sweet, and Roloff) views the book as written about Roman oppression and the fall of the Roman Empire. Due to the development of the imperial cult, pressure to conform and the resultant persecution have become serious threats to the church. The beast thus would be the Roman Empire or the Roman emperor, and the seals, trumpets, and bowls are contemporary judgments God is pouring (or soon will pour) upon Rome itself. Thus the book describes the conflict between church and state, between

faithfulness to God and compromise with the pagan world.

The second is taken by many modern critics (Yarbro Collins, L. Thompson, Krodel, Barr) who argue that there was little persecution and a perceived crisis rather than a real one. The church is still called out from the “world” to follow God, but it is an internal spiritual crisis rather than external persecution. Osiek (1996: 343–44) says the eschatology of the book is not a timetable for the future but a reinterpretation of the present. It provides a spatial interaction between the earthly and the heavenly so as to give new meaning to the present situation. In this case the symbols provide alternative worlds that the readers have to choose between, the transcendent realm of God and the church or the alternative secular world of Rome. The problem of the book then is compromise, as seen in the Nicolaitan cult, and the solution is true worship of Christ (see esp. Krodel).

A third option is to take the book as written before A.D. 70 and prophesying the fall of Jerusalem as God’s judgment upon apostate Israel for rejecting the Messiah and persecuting the church (so Gentry, Chilton). The beast is Rome, the kings from the east are the Roman generals who brought the Roman army from the eastern boundary of the empire to destroy Jerusalem, and Armageddon is the siege of Jerusalem itself. For Kraybill (1999: 32–35) the white horse of 6:1–2 is Rome and the red horse of 6:3–4 is the Jewish War of A.D. 66–70.

This third approach is least viable, not only because it necessitates an early date of writing but because it limits the universal language of the book (all “peoples, languages, tribes, and nations”) to the Jewish people. Nevertheless, the first two are also problematic because they would involve an error of prophecy (which many critical scholars state openly) since final judgment and the end of the world did not come with the fall of the Roman Empire in the fifth century.

Idealist. This popular approach argues that the symbols do not relate to historical events but rather to timeless spiritual truths (so Hendriksen, Hoekema, P. Hughes). As such it relates primarily to the church between the advents, that is, between Christ’s first and second comings. Thus it concerns the battle between God and evil and between the church and the world at all times in church history. The seals, trumpets, and bowls depict God’s judgments on sinners at all times, and the beast refers to all the anti-Christian empires and rulers in history. Thus the book describes the victory of Christ and his people down through history. The millennium in this approach is not a future event but the final cycle of the book (so Hendriksen) describing the church age. There are certain strengths in this view: the centrality of theology for the book, the relevance for the church at all times, the symbolic nature of the book. But it has certain weaknesses as well: the absence of historical connections, the failure to see the future nature of many of the prophecies or to connect them in any way with history (as it seems the text does in several instances).

Futurist. This was the method employed by some of the earliest fathers (e.g., Justin, Irenaeus, Hippolytus), but with the triumph of the allegorical method (taking a spiritual approach to the book) after Origen and of the amillennial view after Augustine and Ticonius, the futurist method (and chiliasm) was not seen again for over a thousand years. The first to develop once more a literal view of the book was Franciscus Ribeira, a Spanish Jesuit who wrote in the late sixteenth century to counter the Reformation antipapal interpretation. While he was not truly a futurist, he turned the attention back to the early fathers, and after him that view returned to prominence and stands alongside the others as equally viable.

Futurism believes that chapters 4–22 refer primarily to events that will take place at the end of history and usher in the eschaton. There are two forms of this approach, dispensationalism and what has been called “classical premillennialism.” Dispensationalists believe that God has brought

about his plan of salvation in a series of dispensations or stages centering on his election of Israel to be his covenant people. Therefore, the church age is a parenthesis in this plan, as God turned to the Gentiles until the Jewish people find national revival (Rom. 11:25–32). At the end of that period, the church will be raptured, inaugurating a seven-year tribulation period in the middle of which the Antichrist will make himself known (Rev. 13) and instigate the “great tribulation” or great persecution of the 144,000 and others among Israel who have become Christians. At the end of that period will come the parousia as Christ returns in judgment, followed by a literal millennium (20:1–10), great white throne judgment (20:11–15), and the beginning of eternity in heavenly bliss (21:1–22:5). Classical premillennialism is similar but does not hold to dispensations. Thus there is only one return of Christ, after the tribulation period (Matt. 24:29–31; cf. Rev. 19:11–21), and it is the whole church, not just the nation of Israel, that passes through the tribulation period. Also, dispensationalists view themselves as literalists on the symbols, while the second school would take many of them to be symbolic (see above). There are some weaknesses of this school as well: it can develop a perspective that would remove its applicability to first-century Christians (see above on the “prophecy” movement), and it can often deteriorate to mere speculation cut off from first-century backgrounds. If all we have are events without symbolic/theological significance, much of the power of the book can be lost.

Eclectic. Many scholars in the last few decades (Morris, Johnson, Giesen, Mounce, Beale) prefer to combine more than one of the views above. While the historical approach has very limited (if any) value, the other three can be profitably combined to capture how John probably intended his book to be understood. Harrington (1993: 16) calls the futurist approach “gross misinterpretation . . . unsavory and even dangerous. . . . The idea of an elect minority being shunted to the safe regions of the upper air while a vengeful Lamb destroys the inhabitants of the earth is scarcely Christian.” Of course, this is a gross caricature of the futurist position, but some tendencies at the extreme edges come close to this. All of the approaches can be dangerous when taken to the extreme.

The solution is to allow the preterist, idealist, and futurist methods to interact in such a way that the strengths are maximized and the weaknesses minimized. Beale, for instance, calls his method “a redemptive-historical form of modified idealism” (1999: 48). He takes the symbols in an inaugurated sense as describing the church age from the present to the future. For instance, the beast of 13:1–8 refers both to the “many antichrists” throughout church history and to the final Antichrist at the end of history (1999: 680–81). The approach of this commentary is similar, but the futurist rather than the idealist position is primary. My study of ancient apocalyptic and of the Book of Revelation has led me to believe that John’s visions (esp. chaps. 4–22) were primarily intended to describe the events that will end world history. The saints in these chapters are believers alive in that final period, and the beast is the Antichrist who will lead the “earth-dwellers”/unbelievers in a final pogrom against all the people of God. The seals, trumpets, and bowls symbolize a final series of judgments by which God will turn the evil deeds of the nations back upon their heads (the Roman legal principle of *lex talionis*, the law of retribution) to prove his sovereignty once and for all and to give them a final chance to repent (9:20–21; 11:13; 14:6–7; 16:9, 11). But the preterist school is also correct, because the visions use the events of the future to address John and his readers in the present. Most of the imagery used to describe the beast and Babylon the Great comes from actual first-century parallels. The beast is a final Nerolike figure, and Babylon is the final unholy Roman Empire. One of my definitions for apocalyptic is “the present addressed through parallels with the future.” John’s readers were being asked to identify with the people at the end of history and gain perspective for their present suffering through the

future trials of God's people. This leads us to the idealist position, also intended in the text, for these final events are also timeless symbols meant to challenge the church in every era. The three-and-a-half-year great tribulation provides models for the similar tribulations of the saints down through history. Therefore, this commentary is quite similar to Beale's except for the centrality of the futurist approach (also similar to Ladd, Beasley-Murray, Michaels, and Mounce).

Text

Due to restraints in the length and purpose of this commentary, I have not tried to discuss every textual problem but rather have restricted myself to the important ones. Revelation has an interesting textual history; a number of church fathers rejected the book because of the chiliast debate and its use by the Montanists. Therefore, there are fewer extant manuscripts than for any other NT book and a great number of textual difficulties. Indeed, until the magisterial studies of Hoskier (1929) and Schmid (1955–56), it was thought virtually impossible to determine the original text. As Aune (1997: cxxxvi–clvi) points out, there are five types of evidence: (1) papyri (□¹⁸, containing 1:4–7, from the 3d–4th century; □²⁴, containing 5:5–8 and 6:5–8, from the early 4th; □⁴³, containing 2:12–13 and 15:8–16:2, from the 6th–7th; □⁴⁷, containing 9:10–17:2, from the 3d; □⁸⁵, containing 9:19–10:2, 5–9, from the 4th–5th; and □⁹⁸, containing 1:13–20, possibly from the 2d); (2) uncials, with three complete manuscripts (℣, from the 4th century, A from the 5th, and 046 from the 10th), three with just a single page (0163 from the 5th century, 1069 from the 4th, and 0207 from the 4th), and several with much of the book (C from the 5th century; P from the 9th; 051 from the 10th; 052 from the 10th); (3) minuscules (293 total); (4) patristic quotations (including most of those named in the section below on “Canonicity”); and (5) the versions (Latin, Armenian, Georgian, Coptic, Ethiopic, and Syriac).

While scholars feel more confident than ever that we can get close to the original text of Revelation, it is not an easy task due to the nature of the manuscripts. The student must watch closely not only the quality of the manuscripts and the internal criteria for evaluating the strength of a reading but also scribal tendencies in trying to harmonize the difficult grammatical constructions (see below on “Language and Grammar”). As Aland and Aland (1989: 247) point out, while □⁴⁷ and ℣ are normally superior to A and C, in Revelation they are not, so decisions must be made with great care.

Canonicity

The Apocalypse seems to have been accepted almost from the beginning in the Western church (see the excellent discussion in Swete 1912: cvii–cxix; Giesen 1997: 45–48). It appears to have been recognized by Papias (as stated in the commentary on the book by Andreas in the sixth century) and may be reflected in Ignatius (A.D. 110–17; *Eph.* 15.3 = Rev. 21:3; *Phld.* 6.1 = Rev. 3:12) and the Epistle of Barnabas (A.D. 130–31; Barn. 6.13 = Rev. 21:3; Barn. 21.3 = Rev. 22:10), though there is considerable doubt as to the viability of the connection. As already stated, it was accepted by Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Tertullian, Hippolytus, Clement of Alexandria, and Origen. It was included in the earliest list of canonical works, the Muratorian Canon, in the latter part of the second century. There was some opposition, but that stemmed from Marcion, who rejected all NT books that used the OT, and from Gaius and the Alogoi, who rejected it because of its use by the Montanists. They argued that the symbolism of the book did not edify the reader and that there were factual errors (e.g., there was no church at Thyatira in the late second century). These arguments were answered

by Epiphanius and Hippolytus, and the book was generally accepted in the West (though Jerome later had some doubts).

The Eastern church was a different case. There Origen's pupil, Dionysius, bishop of Alexandria from 248 to 264 (see Eusebius, *Eccl. Hist.* 7.24–25), opposed the chiliastic views of Nepos, a bishop in Egypt, and believed that linguistic differences with the Gospel of John as well as differences in thought and style meant that the apostle John was not the author. His influence led to serious doubts in the East. Eusebius, bishop of Caesarea early in the fourth century, said Revelation was written by John the Elder and refused to consider it canonical. Other Eastern fathers who doubted it were Cyril of Jerusalem, Chrysostom, Theodore of Mopsuestia, and Theodoret of Cyrus. As a result it was not in the canonical list at the Council of Laodicea in 360, was not included in the lectionaries of the Eastern church, and was omitted from the Peshitta, the Syriac Bible. Athanasius accepted it completely, however, and it is in the official canonical list at the Council of Carthage in 397. Somewhat as a result of the Greek commentaries of Oecumenius and Andreas in the sixth century, Revelation gradually gained favor in the East and in 680 was given canonical status at the Council of Constantinople.

Language and Grammar

Everyone agrees that the Greek of Revelation is the most difficult of the NT. This is due not only to the apocalyptic tone of the book but also to its theology and its use of the OT. For instance, in 1:4 the phrase “the one who is and who was and who is about to come” is in the nominative case even though it follows the preposition ἀπό (*apo*, from) and should have been in the genitive. John clearly wants the reader to see it as a divine title and to reflect on the implications of its theology for his book (see the commentary below).

There have been several monumental studies of the grammar of the book (see R. Charles 1920: 1.cxvii–cxlix; Mussies 1971; Mussies 1980; S. Thompson 1985; Aune 1998: clx–ccvii). The solecisms or seeming grammatical irregularities have been attributed to many different reasons. It is commonly stated that they are due to Semitisms and awkward Aramaisms (see esp. S. Thompson 1985; Mussies 1980: 170–71; R. Charles 1920: 1.clii says the author is often thinking in Hebrew as he writes the Greek). Newport (1986; 1987) argues that prepositions in the book show “significant Semitic influence.” Porter (1989) challenges this prevailing assumption that they are Semitic and argues that the clumsy grammar lies within normal Greek usage, so that each problem must be studied individually. He says that the Greek could stem from a Jewish-Christian dialect in first-century Palestine (1989: 583–84; see also Trudinger 1966: 84–88). The Greek of Revelation is not a hybrid but falls “within the range of possible registers of Greek usage of the first century” (Porter 1989: 603). D. Schmidt (1991: 596–602) believes that most anomalies are due to Septuagintal influence with its translation-Greek style, and Beale (1999: 100–101) believes that they usually signal OT allusions and carry over the grammar of those allusions (see also Bauckham 1993b: 286–87). For instance, the unusual “eternal gospel to proclaim” in 14:6–7 could be a reflection of Ps. 96:2b, “Proclaim his salvation from day to day.” Callahan (1995: 456–57) adds that the solecisms are deliberate and are used to draw the reader to important truths (e.g., the nominatives in 1:4, 5; 2:17). In a sense most of the above can be incorporated into a general covering statement: the solecisms of Revelation are due more to Septuagintal influence but also betray some Semitic features at times; though they fall within the parameters of vulgar Greek, they more often than not highlight allusions to OT texts and critical truths.

Use of the Old Testament

Everyone agrees that the OT is alluded to more often in the Apocalypse than in any other NT book, but no one agrees about the exact number of allusions, because it is difficult to determine partial quotations, allusions, and echoes of the OT in the book. As Paulien (1988: 37–38) says, the problem is the absence of a method for detecting allusions (where OT words and phrases are used) and especially echoes (where the connection is thematic rather than linguistic). According to Swete (1911: cliii n. 1) there are 46 references to Isaiah, 31 to Daniel, 29 to Ezekiel, 27 to the Psalms, and then Genesis, Deuteronomy, Jeremiah, Joel, and Zechariah.[6] Beale (1999: 77) argues that Daniel is the “most influential,” stating that Revelation on the whole is a midrash on Dan. 2 and 7 (1984 passim), but it is difficult to say that any one book stands out from the others. As Moyise (1995: 63) states, “Revelation is a fresh composition which has used Daniel as *one* of its sources.” John considered the entire OT to be his source and chose freely from its rich truths. What makes his use of the OT difficult is that he has no introductory formulas; he embeds the allusions directly into his narrative. This makes his book unique among NT works and increases the difficulty for the interpreter.

Scholars differ in their opinions as to whether John was faithful to the contexts of the OT allusions or largely disregarded their original meanings. Schüssler Fiorenza points to the anthological style of John, in which he moves from one allusion to another without mentioning the OT context, and concludes (1985: 135), “He does not interpret the OT but uses its words, images, phrases, and patterns as a language arsenal in order to make his own theological statement or express his own theological vision.” Beale (1999: 81–86) lists four reasons why many believe John fails to consider the OT context: (1) the informal nature of the citations; (2) his prophetic spirit that causes him to center on his own authority rather than that of the OT; (3) his illiterate readers from pagan Greek backgrounds who would have been unable to understand such contextual allusions; and (4) insufficient evidence that John is consciously interpreting the texts he cites. None of these is conclusive, however, for the data themselves fail to support a view of absolute disregard for OT context. Certainly, some demonstrate more creative use of the OT, such as the use in 1:7 of Zech. 12:10, which in its original setting spoke of the revival of “the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem” that “mourn for him,” undoubtedly for their sins. But John has replaced the reference to Jerusalem with “the peoples of the earth” and seemingly has them mourning because of imminent divine judgment. In this commentary, however, I argue that there is a double meaning (see below), and it leads into the two tracks of the book with regard to the nations: some mourning for sin and converting (5:9–10; 11:13; 14:6–7; 15:4; 21:24, 26), and others mourning because they have opposed God and felt his wrath (6:15–17; 11:18; 14:8–11; 16:6; 18:2–3, 6–8). In other words, John is faithful on the whole to the OT context but nevertheless transforms it deliberately by applying it to his thesis regarding the nations of the earth as analogous to the nation of Israel in Zechariah.

The thesis of this commentary is that John is fully cognizant of the context behind his allusions but nevertheless transforms them by applying them to the new apocalyptic situation in his visions. Beale (1999: 97) addresses the question whether the OT is servant (thus used creatively by John) or guide (thus controlling John’s use of it); it is “both a servant and a guide: for John the Christ-event is the key to understanding the OT, and yet reflection on the OT context leads the way to further comprehension of this event and provides the redemptive-historical background against which the apocalyptic visions are understood; the New Testament interprets the Old and the Old interprets the New.”

Fekkes (1994: 286–90) discusses the error of those who “find prophetic activity and authority incompatible with exegetical activity” (286). He points out that anthological style does not obviate contextual fidelity. Adapting OT contexts to John’s contemporary situation does indeed constitute interpretation. But when the prophetic spirit creates, it does not do so *ex nihilo*. “John certainly expected his readers to appreciate the exegetical foundation of his visions” (290). In this sense John is in keeping with NT writers such as Matthew, Paul, and the author of Hebrews who also transformed OT texts to show their fulfillment in the NT situation, but not without cognizance of their original context (see Hays 1989 *passim*). Moyise (1995: 108–38) calls this exegetical activity “intertextuality,” defining this as “the dynamic interaction of shared language” (138). On the issue of respect for context he says, “The most fundamental thing is that John has built a bridge between two contexts, thereby setting in motion an interaction that continues to reverberate throughout the whole book.” He calls this a “dialectical imitation, in which the symbolic world of the Old Testament is dynamically used and a broad interplay occurs between two worlds” (1993: 295). I would see this interaction as a process of transformation, as John has taken the original context of OT passages and applied it via typology to the visions God has sent him.^[7]

Unity and Structure

Unity. Because the book contains a series of “repetitions, doublets, and artificial constructions” (Schüssler Fiorenza 1985: 160), many scholars have felt the need to develop a theory of compilation or revision by more than one editor. While such theories were more popular in the heyday of source criticism (1880–1925), there have been sporadic attempts throughout the years. At the same time, the unity of language and thought in the book is so extensive that many recent commentators assume unity and do not even discuss redactional theories (Beasley-Murray, Krodel, Roloff, Mounce, Beale). Sweet (1979: 35) responds to the fact that at first glance the book seems “impossibly disordered and coherent”: “a glance at other apocalyptic books shows that the genre is in its nature incoherent, with bewildering changes of scene and speaker, interjections, repetitions, and inconsistencies. . . . On our view, allowing for the looseness of the genre, Revelation is an impressively coherent whole, and can be taken as substantially the work of one mind.”

Still, there is enough substance to the inconsistencies and doublets to justify a closer look at the possibility of several redactions (see the excellent surveys in Schüssler Fiorenza 1985: 160–64; Guthrie 1990: 967–69; and Aune 1997: cx–cxvii). There are three types of source-critical theories:

1. Compilation theories posit that more than one separate Jewish or Christian apocalypse was combined to form the book. Some (Weyland) argued for the combination of two Jewish works, while others (Spitta, Weiss) believed Jewish and Christian apocalypses were compiled together. Boismard (1952) theorized that a single author compiled material he had written during the reigns of Nero and Vespasian. Ford (1975b) stated that chapters 4–11 stem from the circle of John the Baptist, chapters 12–19 were written by a later disciple, and chapters 19–22 and 1–3 were added still later by Jewish-Christian disciples.
2. Revision theories argue that a single apocalyptic work was later revised in a series of stages. Vischer (1886) believed a Jewish apocalypse was translated and revised by a Christian editor. R. H. Charles (1920: 2.144–54) posited that John, the original author, died after completing the work through 20:3. The rest of the book was assembled somewhat clumsily by a later disciple from a series of separate sources. This later editor also added several interpolations into

John's original text (e.g., 1:4c, 8, 14; 2:5, 22; 4:5, 6, 8). Kraft (1974) asserted that a single author wrote the work in several stages, with perhaps chapters 2–3 and 21:9–22:5 added by a later editor. It was originally a prophecy of the end times centering on the seven seals, but the author added the trumpets and bowls and changed the perspective to a series of divine punishments. Prigent (1988: 371–73) argued for two editions, with the second adding the seven letters and the epilogue of 22:16–21 as well as interpolations like 16:15; 21:25; 17:15. Whealen (1981: 54–56) believed that the central section (4:1–22:7) was originally a Jewish apocalypse but was transformed via fourteen Christian interpolations (11:8; 12:17; 13:8; 14:12b; 16:15; 17:6; 18:13, 20; 19:9b–10, 13; 20:4, 6; 21:14; 22:7).

3. Fragmentary theories assert that fragments from Jewish apocalypses were later incorporated into the original text. Bousset (1906: 414–15) proposed that the author incorporated 7:1–8; 11:1–13; 12:1–7; 13:11–18; 14:14–20; 17:1–18:24; and 21:9–22:5 into his original work.

Aune (1997: cxviii–cxxxiv) combines the above options into a comprehensive redaction-critical theory. He believes that the author composed several different apocalyptic tracts for a variety of reasons over twenty to thirty years and then decided to combine them into a single document. This occurred in three stages. Stage one consisted of twelve self-contained units written in the 50s and 60s (7:1–17; 10:1–11; 11:1–13; 12:1–17; 13:1–18; 14:1–20; 17:1–18; 18:1–24; 19:11–16; 20:1–10; 20:11–15; 21:9–22:5), with some perhaps written while he was a Jew (7:1–8; 11:1–13) and others after he converted to Christianity. Stage two saw the compilation of the first edition from A.D. 69 to 74 with added material intended to introduce the document (1:7–12a) and then to unify the twelve units into a single section (4:1–22:5) by providing an overarching eschatological framework (e.g., 20:4–6) to bind together the sections (e.g., 1:20; 4:1, 5; 5:6; 9:4; 10:7; 11:7, 14a) or to Christianize Jewish texts (e.g., 12:11; 14:13; 16:6; 17:6). Stage three saw the final edition after the turn of the century, with further material added to frame the document (1:1–3, 4–6; 1:12b–3:22; 22:6–21) and to stress the exaltation of Christ into unity with God.

These redactional theories are interesting and, though speculative, certainly possible. It is better, however, to see the unity of style and composition, as well as the similar style of other ancient apocalyptic works, as indicating deliberate doublets and repetitions rather than separate recensions. The structure as it is makes a great deal of sense and fits together rather well. Thus there is no need to develop a complicated theory of editorial strata. The unity of the book, both in language and in structure, seems evident from the data, and theories of composition are ultimately unnecessary.

Structure. Outlines of Revelation vary perhaps more than with any other book of the Bible, for several reasons. First, scholars by nature look for new approaches to old problems, so some diversity is to be expected. But there are unusual problems with Revelation, partly because of the subgenres combined in the book (epistle, prophecy, apocalypse). For instance, one has to decide whether to organize the book chronologically or topically. If the latter, does one see recapitulation just in the seals, trumpets, and bowls or in all of chapters 4–20? Is the prologue 1:1–10 or 1:1–20? Is the throne room vision (chaps. 4–5) a separate section or introductory to the seals of chapter 6? How many interludes are there, two (7:1–17; 10:1–11:13) or three (with 12:1–14:20)? Or are the first two interludes actually part of the sixth seals and trumpets, with the third an introduction to the bowls? Are the scrolls of chapters 5 and 10 the same? How does one see the structure of 17:1–22:5—does the first part end at 18:24, 19:5, or 19:10; and does the second end at 19:21 or 21:8? Finally, how much chiasm does one see in the book?

Various phrases have been used to structure the book: “and I saw” (minor section breaks), “I was in the Spirit” (so 1:1–8, 1:9–3:22; 4:1–16:21; 17:1–21:8; 21:9–22:5; 22:6–21, used to construct main headings by C. Smith 1994: 384–87), “come and see” (1:1–3:22; 4:1–16:21; 17:1–22:5; 22:6–21), “what must come to pass” (1:19–3:22; 4:1–22:6; so Beale 1999: 111). Waechter (1994: 173–82) notes four types of outlines: (1) those with a chiastic structure (Moffatt, Schüssler Fiorenza, Strand; see also Lee 1998: 174–75); (2) those viewing it as a dramatic seven-act play patterned after Greek theater (Bowman; Brewer 1936; Blevins; also Spinks 1978) or a three-act play (Barr 1984: 44–45); (3) those organizing it as a series of sevens (Lohmeyer, Farrer, Yarbrough Collins, Ford); and (4) those seeing it as a liturgical work built on early liturgical or festal patterns (O’Rourke, M. Shepherd). There are also some who see recapitulation as the key to the structure and the book (Bornkamm 1937; Hendriksen 1967: 22–31; Griblin 1994: 94–95).

These and other structural questions are answered in the introductions to the sections in the commentary below. I must note, however, one important caveat: no single structural scheme for the book will suffice because the sections relate at more than one level. For instance, the throne room vision of chapters 4–5 at one level introduces the seals and at another level functions as the final preparatory section to the seals, trumpets, and bowls (with the vision of Christ standing among the lampstands and the seven letters). Also, the central section of chapters 12–14 stands by itself as a vision of the opponents in the great cosmic war but at the same time is the third interlude interrupting the three judgment septets. Introductory sections like 8:2–5 (to the trumpets) and 15:2–4 (to the bowls) also recapitulate themes from the preceding sections (judgment from the sixth seal [6:12–17] and the triumph of the victorious saints from 14:1–5). Thus the outline proposed here is only one level of a very complex and intricately structured book.

I. Prologue (1:1–8)

II. Churches addressed (1:9–3:22)

A. Inaugural vision (1:9–20)

B. Letters to the seven churches (2:1–3:22)

1. Letter to Ephesus (2:1–7)

2. Letter to Smyrna (2:8–11)

3. Letter to Pergamum (2:12–17)

4. Letter to Thyatira (2:18–29)

5. Letter to Sardis (3:1–6)

6. Letter to Philadelphia (3:7–13)

7. Letter to Laodicea (3:14–22)

III. God in majesty and judgment (4:1–16:21)

A. God’s sovereignty in judgment (4:1–11:19)

1. Throne room vision—God and the Lamb in heaven (4:1–5:14)

a. God on his throne (4:1–11)

b. Christ the Lamb, worthy to open the seals (5:1–14)

2. Opening the seals (6:1–8:1)

a. First six seals (6:1–17)

b. First interlude: saints on earth and in heaven (7:1–17)

i. Sealing the saints (7:1–8)

ii. Great multitude in heaven (7:9–17)

c. Seventh seal (8:1)

3. Seven trumpets (8:2–11:19)

- a. Introduction to trumpet judgments (8:2–6)
- b. First four trumpets (8:7–12)
- c. Fifth trumpet / first woe (8:13–9:11)
- d. Sixth trumpet (9:12–21)
- e. Interlude: prophecy and witness (10:1–11:13)
 - i. John and the little scroll (10:1–11)
 - ii. John measures the temple and altar (11:1–2)
 - iii. Ministry, death, and resurrection of the two witnesses (11:3–13)
- f. Seventh trumpet (11:14–19)

B. Great conflict between God and the forces of evil (12:1–16:21)

1. Interlude: great conflict described (12:1–14:20)
 - a. Conflict between the dragon and God as well as his people (12:1–13:18)
 - i. The woman and the dragon (12:1–6)
 - ii. War in heaven (12:7–12)
 - iii. War on earth (12:13–17)
 - iv. Two beasts wage war (12:18–13:18)
 - (1) The beast from the sea—the Antichrist (12:18–13:10)
 - (2) The beast from the earth—the false prophet (13:11–18)
 - b. Song of the 144,000 (14:1–5)
 - c. Message of three angels (14:6–13)
 - d. Harvest of the earth (14:14–20)
2. Great conflict culminated (15:1–16:21)
 - a. Introduction to the bowls—angels with final plagues (15:1–8)
 - b. Seven last bowl judgments (16:1–21)

IV. **Final judgment at the arrival of the eschaton (17:1–20:15)**

- A. Destruction of Babylon the Great (17:1–19:5)
 1. The great prostitute on the scarlet beast (17:1–18)
 2. Fall of Babylon the Great (18:1–24)
 3. Hallelujah chorus—joy at his just judgment (19:1–5)
- B. Final victory: the end of the evil empire at the parousia (19:6–21)
- C. The thousand-year reign of Christ and final destruction of Satan (20:1–10)
- D. Great white throne judgment (20:11–15)

V. **New heaven and new earth (21:1–22:5)**

- A. Coming of new heaven and new earth (21:1–8)
- B. New Jerusalem as the Holy of Holies (21:9–27)
- C. New Jerusalem as the final Eden (22:1–5)

VI. **Epilogue (22:6–21)**

Theology

Doctrine of God. It seems clear that the primary theme of the book is the sovereignty of God, which is a major theme in virtually all Jewish and Christian apocalypses. Du Rand (1994: 567–71) says that the framework of the book is built around the sovereign kingship of God from the standpoint of God's transcendence over this world. God is both creator and judge, the lord over history. This unfolding message dominates the book. In one sense the early chapters juxtapose two types of

scenes, heavenly (chaps. 1, 4–5, 7) and earthly (chaps. 2–3, 6, 8–9). The heavenly scenes typify worship, joy, peace, and triumph, while the earthly scenes typify troubles, chaos, apostasy, and judgment. The one theme that unifies these is the sovereignty of God, as seen in the titles of chapter 1:

1. “The one who is, was, and is to come” (1:4) means that God is in control of the present in the same way that he was the past and will be in the future (see also 1:8; 4:8; 11:17; 16:5). Bauckham (1993a: 28–30) points out that this is an interpretation of the divine name YHWH and guarantees his future “coming” in salvation and judgment. In other words, God is sovereignly in charge and has guaranteed the future for his people.
2. “The Alpha and Omega” (1:8) means that God is not only controlling the past and the future but is in charge of everything in between. In other words, he is sovereign over all of history. This is interpreted in two synonymous ways, “the First and the Last” (1:17; 22:13) and “the Beginning and the End” (21:6; 22:13). What is interesting is that it is a title for both God (1:8; 21:6) and Christ (1:17; 22:13), showing that John begins and ends his work by emphasizing the sovereignty of both God and Christ over history.
3. “The Almighty” occurs nine times as a designation for God, often in the compound form “Lord God Almighty” (1:8; 4:8; 11:17; 15:3; 16:7, 14; 19:6, 15; 21:22). It signifies his omnipotence and is part of the divine warrior theme in the book. He is not only sovereign over the course of history but also triumphant over all the forces of evil.

This sovereign might is seen in the incredible use of ἐδόθη (*edothē*, was given), a divine passive that points to God’s control of the events. This verb is used frequently in the book (6:2, 4, 8, 11; 7:2; 8:2, 3; 9:1, 3, 5; 11:1, 2; 12:14; 13:5, 7, 14, 15; 16:8) and is especially clustered in the passages on the four horsemen (6:1–8) and the activities of the beast (13:5–15). In other words, even the actions of the forces of evil are controlled by God. Everything they do comes only by permission from God. Yet it goes beyond that. Every aspect of God’s creation flows out of his enabling presence; and the actions of his people and of all celestial powers, good and bad, occur only under his authorization.

One of the dominant images is a wisdom theme, the creation motif. God is emphasized as the creator of the world and therefore as sovereign over it. The twenty-four elders sing (4:11) that God is worthy of worship because “you created all things, and by your will they were created and have their being.” This message culminates the throne room vision of God in all his majesty and power. The ultimate proof of his control over this world is that he both created and sustains it. This is especially emphasized in 10:6, where the angel anchors his oath regarding the end of this world in “him who created the heavens and all that is in them, the earth and all that is in it, and the sea and all that is in it.” These categories sum up the first four trumpets and bowls that are poured out on the earth, the oceanic and inland waters (= the sea) and the heavens. In other words, the God who created this world can destroy it. Finally, in 14:7 the call of the angel with the eternal gospel to “fear God and give him glory” is redefined as “Worship him who made the heavens, the earth, the sea, and the springs of water” (the same categories as in 10:6, replicating the first four trumpets and bowls with the “springs of water” equaling the inland waters; cf. 8:10, 16:4). As Bauckham (1993a: 48) says, “The worship which the whole earth is giving to the beast (13:8) is really due to God, because he, not the beast, is the Creator of all things.” This is the flip side of 10:6, with the God who created now calling people to repentance and worship. In this sense the “new heavens and new earth” of 21:1–22:5 is a new creation, for God first destroys the old earth that is tainted with sin

(20:11; 21:1) and then combines earth and heaven into a new created reality when he “makes all things new” (21:5; on the issue of renovation versus new creation, see discussion of that verse). There can be no better proof of his absolute sovereignty than the creation theme.

One of the predominant images is that of God on his throne. Du Rand (1997: 68–74) sees the throne (occurring forty-six times) as the key to God’s sovereign activity in Revelation. His dominion over both heaven and earth provides the macronarrative of the book. The throne room vision of chapter 4 focuses on his majesty and sovereign splendor (replicating Isa. 6 and Ezek. 1), and it is clear that God, not Caesar, controls the world. There is a sociopolitical dimension to this image, as it presupposes that the secular powers are doomed and that God on his throne will triumph over his enemies. Bauckham (1993b: 40) asserts that Revelation as a whole can be seen as the fulfillment of the first three petitions of the Lord’s Prayer: May your name be made sacred, your kingdom come, and your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. The earthly scene, where his name is not made sacred and his will not done, is soon to be transformed by the sovereign action of the enthroned God. As stated above (on “Apocalyptic Genre and Mind-Set”), the book makes clear that the realm of God is the real world, and the temporary “reign” of evil is an illusion. All earthly powers will be destroyed; since God is already on the throne in heaven, his reign will be actualized on earth. At key points throughout the book, the throne is mentioned (e.g., 6:16; 7:10–11, 15; 8:3; 11:16; 12:5; 16:17; 19:4; 20:11; 21:5) to show the absolute authority of God over all things.

As Caird (1966: 290) notes, John describes God with a great deal of restraint, for three reasons: God is incomprehensible in his divine glory (so no anthropomorphic descriptions); we will not see him until we enter the eternal city (21:4); and in Jesus we have already seen him (cf. John 14:9; 2 Cor. 4:6). We see his work rather than look on his person. He sits on the throne and directs all earthly affairs, allowing evil its day but guaranteeing its ultimate defeat. It is divine justice that prevails at every turn.

Futility of Satan. The flip side of God’s ultimate control centers on the actions of the dragon. There is no portrayal of the dragon as a powerful being. The descriptions of 12:9 and 20:2, 8, 10 center on two things: his adversarial role (that is indeed the meaning of “Satan” and “devil”) and his method, deceit. He is the “accuser” of the believers (12:10) but never overpowers his followers. Instead, he deceives them, and that is also the method of the other two members of the false trinity (16:13), the beast and the false prophet (who “deceive” in 13:14; 19:20). But he has already lost, for the great victory in the Apocalypse occurs not at Armageddon but at the cross. It was the slain Lamb who achieved the great victory (5:6, 12), and the devil “knows his time is short” (12:12). Armageddon is not the final battle but the last act of defiance by an already defeated foe.

Indeed, everything Satan does is a parody or “great imitation” of what God has already done. The mark of the beast (13:16–17) in the right hand or forehead is a mere copy of God sealing the saints in the forehead (7:3). The false trinity (the dragon, beast, and false prophet, 16:13) is an obvious copy of the triune Godhead. The mortal wound that is healed (13:3, 12) imitates the death and resurrection of the Lord. The dragon giving the beast his power, throne, and “great” authority (13:2) copies the relationship between God and Christ. The demand for the nations to worship the beast and dragon (13:8, 14–15) follows the constant commands in Scripture to worship God. Satan may be filled with an insane anger (12:12), but he is not stupid. To do anything right, he can only duplicate the perfect work of God. But he knows his time is short, and his end is absolutely certain. Thus all he can do is create as much havoc as possible in the short time he has left. His futility and frustration are evident throughout, as in his pursuing the woman in chapter 12, the temporary usurpation of the worship only God deserves in chapter 12, and even in punishing and torturing

his own followers in 9:1–21 and 17:16.

Christology. Christ is the focus of the book in many ways. [8] Du Rand (1993a: 304–8) also sees the Christ event (especially as the Lamb) as a unifying theme, tying all the elements of the book together into a unity. It is his death that provides the ultimate defeat of Satan (see above), and his blood is the basis of the saints' victory (12:11) and status as "kingdom and priests" (1:6; 5:9–10). Reddish (1988: 85–86) sees Christ as the archetypal martyr, "the faithful and true witness" (3:14) who is "firstborn from the dead" (1:5) and paves the way for others. He shares the throne with God (5:6; 22:1), and his coming is the ultimate climax of the judgment of evil (19:11–27). As with the Gospel of John, the core of Christology is the oneness motif. God is the Alpha and Omega (1:8; 21:6) and so is Christ (1:17; 22:13). God is on the throne (see above), and so is Christ (5:6; 22:1). The wrath of God (14:10, 19; 15:1) is paralleled by the wrath of the Lamb (6:16). The worship of God in 4:9–11 is paralleled by the worship of Jesus in 5:9–12 (with similar wording), and the twofold worship culminates in 5:13 with the worship of "him who sits on the throne and . . . the Lamb." In short, Revelation continues the emphasis of John in its depiction of Jesus as God.

The initial mention of Jesus in 1:5 sets the tone for the book. First, he is the "faithful witness," a title repeated in 3:14 to Laodicea, where he is called "the faithful and true witness," and in 19:11, where he is called "Faithful and True." In this sense he is the archetype for faithful Christians (2:10, 13; 17:14), who must persevere in their witness (6:9; 11:7; 12:11; cf. "testimony of Jesus" in 1:9; 12:17; 19:10; 20:4). Second, he is "firstborn from the dead," with two main thrusts: Jesus has sovereignty over life and death, and this prepares for Jesus as eschatological judge (20:14; 21:4, an authority he shares with the Father), and Jesus is the prototype for those who would be raised with him (2:7, 11; 20:6; 22:2–3, 14, 17). Third, he is "ruler of the kings of the earth," those enemies of Christ (10:11; 17:18) who will be defeated by him (6:15; 18:9; 19:18) and will eventually bring their glory into the New Jerusalem (21:24; i.e., those who repent on the lines of 14:6–7). Fourth, he has freed us by his blood (see below) and made us a kingdom and priests (5:10; 20:6).

The major title for Christ in Revelation is "Lamb," which appears here 29 of its 30 NT occurrences (all but one [13:11] of Christ) and centers on the great eschatological victory of Christ as paschal lamb on the cross. Reddish (1988: 87–88) says John chose ἀρνίον (*arnion*, lamb) to emphasize Christ as the conquering Lamb. He conquers, however, through his self-sacrifice, by being the slain Lamb (5:6, 9, 12; 13:8) who sheds his blood (5:9; 7:14; 12:11). The very first occurrence (5:6) sets the tone, for Jesus is the "slain Lamb" who triumphs and becomes the eschatological Ram ("seven horns"), receiving the worship of the living creatures and elders (5:8, 12, 13). These two aspects—slain Lamb and eschatological Ram—dominate the book. It is clear that the sacrifice of Jesus as the slain Lamb is the key theme. It is the blood of Jesus that freed his people from their sins (1:5; 7:14; cf. John 1:29; 1 Pet. 1:18–19) and purchased them for God from the nations (5:10). Most of all, Jesus' death on the cross was the great defeat of Satan that allowed the saints to conquer him as well (12:11–12). As Aune (1997: 372) brings out, the image of Christ as Lamb here is probably not so much based on the *tāmîd* sacrifice of lambs each morning and evening throughout the week (Exod. 29:38–46; Num. 28:3–8) or the Passover lamb (Exod. 12:1–20; Lev. 23:5; Num. 9:2–5) as on the NT image of Christ as the Passover lamb (Isa. 53 in Acts 8:32; 1 Cor. 5:7; John 1:29, 36).

The picture of the Lamb as conquering Ram appears not only in 5:6 but also in 17:14, where the ten kings go to war against the Lamb and his army but are "conquered" because "he is Lord of lords and King of kings." The idea of a ram as king goes back to Dan. 8:3–4 (where it symbolized the Medo-Persian Empire) as developed further in 1 Enoch 89.45–46, where the ram "rules over the sheep" and becomes a messianic figure (Aune 1997: 369–70). It is "the wrath of the Lamb" alongside

the face of the enthroned God that causes the nations to cower in fear because “the great day of their wrath has come” in Rev. 6:16–17. The Lamb is also on the throne (5:6; 7:17) and becomes the judge who wields “the book of life” (13:8; 21:27) and punishes the wicked (14:10). It is the Lamb who will welcome and care for his followers in heaven (7:9, 10; 14:1; 21:22–23; 22:1, 3) as his bride (19:7, 9; 21:9). In 7:17 there is another marvelous switch in imagery as the Lamb becomes the Davidic Shepherd-Messiah who leads them to springs of living water. In many of those the Lamb stands alongside God (5:13; 6:16; 7:10; 14:4; 21:22; 22:1, 3; see Bauckham 1993a: 66).

Holy Spirit. At first glance the Spirit of God seems peripheral to the book, for the common titles (Holy Spirit, Spirit of God, Spirit of Christ) are not found. Although not as frequently emphasized as God and Christ, the Spirit is still an essential component of the book. At the heart are the four references to “the seven spirits” in 1:4; 3:1; 4:5; 5:6 (for the debate as to whether this is the Holy Spirit or seven celestial beings, see on 1:4). It stems from Isa. 11:2 LXX and Zech. 4:2, 10 as a reference to the “sevenfold Holy Spirit.” In Rev. 1:4b–5 there is a trinitarian setting in which the Spirit is found between the Father and the Son and placed “before his throne,” that is, the place of power. It is likely that his sevenfold nature symbolizes his perfect carrying out of the work of God in this world. In 3:1 Sardis is told that Christ “holds the sevenfold Spirit of God,” indicating that he is the “Spirit of Christ” sent by the Son as well as the Father. The passage emphasizes Christ’s sovereignty over the churches (the “seven stars”), and the perfect Spirit is the means by which he does so. Thus Christ there is offering the perfect Spirit to help the Sardis church come back from the dead. In 4:5 the sevenfold Spirit is the “seven blazing lamps” before the throne and, building again on Zech. 4:2, 10 (the “seven lamps” that are “the eyes of God”), the perfect Spirit carries out God’s work of overseeing and judging his creation. Finally, in 5:6 the sevenfold Spirit is the “seven eyes” (again Zech. 4) that are “sent out into all the earth” to witness and confront people with the demands of God. In short, the sevenfold Spirit is sent both by the Father and the Son to be his eyes and his presence in this world.

Elsewhere the term “Spirit” stands for the Holy Spirit. In the seven letters the Spirit speaks to the churches and is the source of inspiration for the letters (2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22). As Aune (1997: 36) says, “Since each of the proclamations is presented as the word of the exalted Christ, a close relationship between Christ and the Spirit is presupposed, one that is theologically similar to the Fourth Gospel” (John 14:16, 25–26; 15:26; 16:13–14). Elsewhere the Spirit is the means by which the prophetic visions come to John (“in/by the Spirit” in 1:10; 4:2; 17:3; 21:10) and inspires a prophetic utterance to encourage the martyrs about their heavenly reward (14:13b). Then in 22:17b “the Spirit and the bride” both call for the readers to “come” to Christ (rather than for Christ to return; see on 22:17). In each of these instances the Spirit is the source of inspiration and prophecy, the revelatory voice of God. This culminates in 19:10, where “the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy,” meaning that the church’s witness to Jesus is the heart of Spirit-inspired prophecy. Thus in Revelation the Holy Spirit is sent by the Father and the Son both to be their eyes in this world and to inspire the visions and the prophetic oracles that are the core of the visions.

Cosmic War. The combat theme, while especially predominant in chapters 12–13, is endemic to the whole book. The OT description of Christ in 1:12–20 contains a great many symbols of the divine warrior (eyes like blazing fire, feet like burnished bronze, a two-edged sword coming out of his mouth), and military imagery is found often in the seven letters: 2:5, “I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place”; 2:12, “the one who has the sharp double-edged sword”; 2:16, “fight against them with the sword of my mouth”; 2:23, “strike her children dead”; 2:27, “dash them to pieces like pottery”; 3:9, “I will make them come and fall down at your feet.” Judaism often

saw in the OT the idea of a messianic battle to defeat Israel's enemies. This idea builds on the imagery of God as making war (Exod. 15:3; Isa. 42:13–16; cf. the Qumran War Scroll) and refers to the final eschatological war by which God will bring peace to his people and introduce his final age (e.g., Dan. 7:9–14; Joel 3:11–13; Zech. 14:3–9). For instance, in Rev. 5:5–6 the “root of David” refers to Isa. 11:1, 10, and a messianic figure who will “strike the earth with the rod of his mouth” and “slay the wicked with the breath of his mouth” (11:4b), producing an age in which “the wolf will lie down with the lamb” (11:6). The “lion of the tribe of Judah” refers to Gen. 49:9–10, a passage also seen as messianic by the later Jews. Bauckham (1993a: 214) notes 4QPBless; 1QSb 5.20–29; 2 Esdr. (4 Ezra) 12:31–32, where this is given strong militaristic overtones of Yahweh's defeat of the enemies of Israel.

The messianic war in Revelation caps the theme of martyrdom in the book. Certainly some, like Caird (1966: 87) and Bauckham (1993b: 229, “the messianic army is an army of martyrs who triumph through their martyrdom”) go too far when they see every believer martyred and martyrdom as the basis of the defeat of Satan. Nevertheless, martyrdom does connote a defeat of Satan, and here lies one of the delicious ironies of the book. At the same time the beast is allowed by God to “conquer the saints” (13:7), by yielding their lives the saints have “conquered him” (12:11). In this the saints duplicate the victory of Christ, who by his death defeated Satan. The blood of these martyrs lay at the base of the altar as a sacrifice for God (6:9), and they cried out for vengeance to God (6:10). God gave them white robes of victory and promised to vindicate them (6:11). The great cosmic war to come was an aspect of that vindication. It begins with the sixth bowl, where their enemies cowered in fear before “the wrath of the Lamb” (6:15–17). It continued with the trumpet judgments that built on “all the prayers of the saints” in 8:3 that ascended to God and led to the censer hurled to earth (8:5), inaugurating the judgments. The great war of chapters 12–13 must also be seen in that vein, for when the dragon attacked the woman, she was taken to the desert, where God protected her (12:6, 13–17). The combat motif, best developed by Yarbrow Collins (1976), combines the themes of the messianic war and God's vindication of his suffering saints.

The entire theme of “conquering” in the book occurs when the victory of Christ (3:21; 5:5; 17:14; 19:11–21) is paralleled by the victory of his followers (seven times in the seven letters as well as in 12:11; 15:2; 17:14; 21:7). Thus as the beast makes war against the saints, they conquer him “through the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, because they did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death” (12:11). Thus Satan is defeated by three things—the blood of Christ, the faithful witness of the saints, and the holy war from God.

Theodicy. The defense of God's character and judgment is an important theme in the book.^[9] There are four aspects to it:

1. God's judgment reveals his righteous character. As stated above, the sovereignty of God and Christ is the controlling motif. As sovereign, God is judge of all the earth, and divine wrath is the necessary reaction to the prevalence of evil in the world (6:16–17; 11:18; 14:10, 19; 15:1, 7; 16:1, 19; 19:15). Christ is not only the redeemer but the judge who wields the two-edged sword (1:16; 2:12, 16; 19:15, 21); and the seals, trumpets, and bowls are the result of his righteous judgment. The two aspects of his holiness and justice are a cause for worship. The angel flying in midair in 14:6–7 tells the nations, “Fear God and give him glory, because the hour of his judgment has come.” The proper response to God's character as judge is repentance and worship. These judgments are called “righteous deeds” in 15:3–4, and in 15:7–8 smoke fills the

temple as the glory and power of God are revealed in the pouring out of the seven bowls. Then in 18:12 the saints are told to rejoice in the judgments, and in 19:1–12 they lead to the Hallelujah choruses (esp. 19:1, 3, 4) as God's righteous judgments are celebrated.

2. God's judgments are necessitated by the depravity and rejection of the earth-dwellers. There is a great deal of emphasis on the evil acts of the nations: their shameful deeds (17:4, 5; 21:27), murder (6:9; 9:21; 13:7, 10, 15; 20:4), celebrating evil (11:10), immorality (2:14, 20, 21; 9:21; 14:8; 17:2, 4; 18:3, 9; 19:2), sorcery (8:21; 18:23; 22:15), idolatry and blasphemy (2:14, 20; 9:20; 13:1, 5, 6; 16:9, 11, 21; 17:3; 22:15), falsehood (2:2; 3:9; 14:5; 16:13; 19:20; 20:10; 21:27; 22:15), and a summary in 21:8. It is the guilt of those punished that is clearly the basis of the judgments. Yet it is their rejection of God's offer of repentance that is the true core of theodicy in the book. In 2:21 the false prophetess Jezebel refuses to repent, and she is warned of impending judgment (2:22–23). Three times in the trumpet and bowl judgments a call to repentance goes out (9:20–21; 16:9, 11; for the debate on this, see the discussion of these verses in the commentary). In each case, the outpouring of God's wrath is a warning call to the nations, and as in the Egyptian plagues (the model for the first four trumpets and bowls) the judgments disproved the earthly gods and demonstrated the sovereignty of Yahweh. This constituted a call to repentance (implicit in these and explicit in 14:6–8), and their rejection in each instance proved their total depravity and the justice of God's judgments. It is likely that theodicy culminates in the millennial narrative of 20:1–10 (whichever view one takes of that passage). The view of this commentary is that those earth-dwellers not part of the army in 19:17–21 live through the period and comprise the "nations" of 20:7–9. In the story form of the text, they then live the equivalent of fourteen lifetimes under the rule of Christ and the saints while Satan is entirely "chained" and unable to deceive them. Yet as soon as Satan is released, they immediately flock to join him. This proves how total their depravity is and necessitates the great white throne judgment of 20:11–15. Here is the answer to those who argue for universalism—depravity is an eternal force, and it demands an eternal punishment. The truth is: Hitler and Stalin will hate God more in a billion years than they did the day they died!
3. God's judgment executes his righteous justice, as sin turns upon itself. This is a natural outgrowth of the previous section. The basic principle of justice in the book is the same legal standard behind both the OT and Roman jurisprudence—*lex talionis*, the law of retribution. It can be stated simply: what you do to others God will do to you. Basically, God allows sin to come full circle and consume itself. The basic law is stated in 2:23, "I will repay each of you according to your deeds," a theme found often in the OT (Ps. 28:4; 61:13; 62:12; Prov. 24:12; Isa. 3:11; Jer. 17:10; Lam. 3:64) and in the NT (Matt. 16:27; Rom. 2:6; 14:12; 1 Cor. 3:12–15; 2 Cor. 5:10; 1 Pet. 1:17) as well as in Revelation (saved—2:23; 11:18; 14:13; 20:12; 22:12; and unsaved—11:18; 18:6; 20:13). The sins of the nations have brought God's just punishment down upon them. The theme of evil turning upon the evildoers is also found frequently. The first four seals tell the story of the "four horsemen of the Apocalypse"—lust for conquest, civil war, famine, and death. Each one turns steadily back upon the conquerors until they too are dead. Then in 14:8, 10 Babylon, which made the nations "drink the passionate wine of her adulteries," will be forced to "drink the wine of God's fury . . . poured full strength into the cup of his wrath." In 16:5–7 God's justice is seen in the turning of the waters into blood: "they shed the blood of your saints and prophets, and you have given them blood to drink, as they deserve." Finally, in 18:6 the voice from heaven says, "Give back to her as she has given; pay her back double for what she has done."

4. God's judgment is proven in his vindication of the righteous. In the book the saints are both loved by God (3:9; 20:9) and persecuted by the followers of the beast (13:7, 10; 15:2). Martyrdom is a key component of the book (see also above on messianic war), seen not only in 6:9–11 but also in 17:14, where they have “washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.” The evil of the unholy Roman Empire is especially proven by the fact that it is “drunk with the blood of the saints” (17:6; cf. 12:17; 13:7, 15; 18:24). But God will vindicate the martyrs (6:11) and “wipe away every tear” (7:17; 21:4). As said above, their death is their victory over Satan (15:2; 20:4). Moreover, as also said earlier, their prayers for vindication are answered by God progressively through the book, seen in the pleas of the nations to be hid from divine wrath in 6:15–17 to the censer with the prayers of the saints filled with fire and hurled down in judgment in 8:2–5. The judgments of the rest of the book progressively detail that vindication, and it culminates with the saints [\[10\]](#) on thrones judging in 20:4 and the statement that they will reign for eternity in 22:5.

Mission. It is often said that there is no mission theme in the Apocalypse, for it centers on judgment and retribution. However, that is not true. In this book God has a great interest in reaching the lost. The theme begins in 1:7, with its creative use of Zech. 12:10. In the context of 1:7, it is most likely that the prophecy of the nations “mourning because” of the one they had “pierced” refers to grief over their coming destruction (cf. the funeral laments of 18:9–19). But the original meaning of Zech. 12:10 refers to mourning for sin and a great revival that leads to cleansing “from sin and impurity” in 13:1. This fits the mission theme in the book, and it is likely that there is a double meaning in the use of Zech. 12:10 here that introduces the future for the nations (see commentary on 1:7) and describes the two paths they will take depending on their response to God's call (the “eternal gospel” in 14:6–7; see further below). Those people among the nations who accept that call will repent (11:13) and find salvation because Christ's blood has “purchased [them] for God” (5:9). Thus the nations will produce an innumerable multitude that stands before the throne and the Lamb in triumph (7:9). They will worship God (15:4) and both bring their glory into the New Jerusalem (21:26) and walk in its light (21:24).

Those among the nations who reject God's call follow a radically different path and have the opposite destiny. In this sense the nations have drunk Babylon's maddening wine of adultery (14:8; 18:3), worshiped the dragon and the beast (13:4, 7–8), and aligned themselves with Satan (20:3). They have turned against God (11:18), and cursed him (16:9, 11, 21). They have persecuted and killed the saints (6:10), then gloated over the death of the witnesses (11:10). The great prostitute rules over them (17:15), and they participate in all her sins (17:3–4), including killing the saints (17:6). They join the false trinity in that final act of rebellion called Armageddon (16:13–16; 19:19). Therefore, they are the object of God's wrath (11:18a; 14:10), including eternal torment (14:11). The earth-dwellers have become Babylon the Great, whose great sins have led God to “pay her back double” for all her depraved deeds (18:2–8, esp. v. 6). To them God has sent the “hour of trial” (3:10), the three judgment septets, both to punish them for their crimes and to give them a final opportunity to repent. But when they refuse that final offer, they face final judgment and eternity in the lake of fire (20:11–15).

But is there a true offer of repentance? Many (e.g., Beale, Aune, Schnabel) believe there is no offer in 9:20–21; 16:9, 11, but the emphasis instead is on their absolute rejection of God. However, the words of “the eternal gospel” in 14:6–7 are “Fear God and give him glory,” and in 15:4b the worship of the nations is identified with “Who will not fear you, O Lord, and bring glory to your

name?” in 15:4a. Moreover, in 16:9 the sinners “refuse to repent and glorify him,” with “glorify him” virtually a definition of “repent.” From this it is likely that the trumpets and bowls were in part a final offer of repentance, calling on the nations to “fear God and glorify him.” Moreover, in 11:13 we have one example of that repentance, as the great earthquake following the ascension of the two witnesses to heaven leads to the conversion of the survivors. In conclusion, Revelation is not just a book of judgment but also a book that details the compassion of God and his mission to a lost world.

Perseverance of the Saints. While the vertical axis of the book is the sovereignty of God, the horizontal axis is the responsibility of the saints to persevere. One of the chief characteristics of apocalyptic literature is its exhortation that the people of God remain faithful to him. H. Maier (1997: 133–34) states that apocalyptic is inherently parenetic and does not just encourage but both challenges and warns “the indolent and faithless” (136) to turn their lives around. In the NT eschatology always leads to ethics. Every passage dealing with the return of Christ ends with a call to conduct one’s life with both vigilance and diligence. There is often a throwaway phrase like “the end is near” in a passage that is not apocalyptic, and it is always connected with ethical demands (Rom. 13:11; 1 Cor. 7:29; 10:11; 1 Pet. 7:11; James 5:8; 1 John 2:18). The point is that when Christ returns, he will hold believers accountable for the way they are living their lives (cf. the parables of Matt. 25), so they had better be faithful. Thus perseverance is naturally one of the key themes of Revelation.

Five concepts carry this theme: endurance, faithfulness, witness, conquering, and obedience. These occur throughout the book and unify it around the horizontal axis of responsibility. At the outset, Jesus is the model for the saints as the “faithful witness” (1:5), meaning that he is the archetype of those who are characterized by public proclamation and authentication, usually in the face of tremendous opposition, of divine realities in word and life. This builds on 1:2, where the “testimony of Jesus” is probably a subjective genitive, meaning that Jesus functions as the revealer of divine truth (see also 22:16). Jesus is also the model in 3:14, where he is “the faithful and true witness” contra the Laodicean church, whose smug dependence on their wealth constituted unfaithfulness. Mathews (1993: 310–11) says that endurance in the Apocalypse is inherently christocentric. It is active participation and patience in suffering, based on Christ’s model of faithful witness, resulting in faithful living. Also, Antipas is a “faithful witness” (2:13) via his martyrdom. He is the forerunner of those who perform the ultimate act of faithful perseverance, martyrdom (cf. 17:6; see above under “Theodicy”).

Perseverance itself is seen first in 1:9, where John is the “companion” of the believers in their suffering. There “endurance” is coupled with “suffering and kingdom” as a summary of the basic experience of believers “in Jesus.” There is a special relation to “suffering” (an ABA pattern in the three), and it is clear that enduring suffering is the path to experiencing the kingdom of God. Ephesus, Thyatira, and Philadelphia were characterized by “perseverance” or endurance, so essentially it is a key characteristic of the victorious Christian. In Ephesus (2:2, 3) perseverance means both enduring hardships and persevering in combating the false teachers. In Thyatira (2:19) it is connected to persevering in works of service. In Philadelphia (3:8) it refers to enduring persecution.

The primary theme of perseverance in the seven letters is seen in the “conquerors” (or “victors” or “overcomers”) to whom the eschatological promises are given (2:7, 11, 17, 26; 3:5, 12, 21). These are the ones who maintain their witness and walk with Jesus in the midst of internal pressure from the false teachers and external persecution from the Jews and Romans. They are “victorious” over

the powers of evil. Bauckham (1993a: 88) calls this “active participation in the divine war against evil,” based on the fact that this is an active verb and not just a passive one. It connotes spiritual warfare as well as faithfulness to God. The saints who will be rewarded have “overcome” the world and stand for Christ in the midst of civil and religious opposition. Söding (1999: 49–54) says that holiness and politics are related, for in both the Jewish and Christian traditions holiness defines one’s relationship to the world and therefore to political entities. In the political realities of the Roman world, Christian dissidence was mandated. John writes from exile on Patmos and relates the radical consequences of following Christ in light of the imperial cult. In short, holiness is the antithesis of political compromise and demands unswerving allegiance and faithfulness to God alone. This theme culminates in 5:5, that incredible christological passage that introduces the “lion of the tribe of Judah” who has “triumphed.” The means of that victory is introduced in the next verse, which redefines the lion as “a lamb looking as if it had been slain.” The victory of the saints in the seven letters is made possible by the ultimate victory of the Lamb upon the cross.

In 6:9 the *μάρτυρία* (*martyria*, witness) theme also moves to center stage as the “martyrs” cry out to God for vengeance. Most commentators agree that while the Greek term was not given the technical meaning of “martyr” for another century or so (see esp. Trites 1973), its use in the Apocalypse was a major factor in that switch of meaning. In this book “witness” connotes martyrdom. Yet it is clear in the book that for the martyrs their death is their victory. In 12:11 the believers “overcome” the devil in two ways: “by the blood of the Lamb” (5:5–6) and “by the word of their testimony. They did not love their lives even to the point of death.” This is similar to the *imitatio Christi* theme in the Gospels, in which the saints are to “take up their cross” or be willing to die for Christ (Mark 8:34 par.). But here that death is their great victory, their ultimate perseverance and faithfulness for their Lord.

Finally, in the rest of the book a series of exhortations call the saints to a life of perseverance in light of the visions. In 12:17 at the end of the passage on the woman, the dragon, and the child, the enraged and frustrated dragon goes to war against “the rest of [the woman’s] offspring,” namely the people of God, and chapter 13 describes how the dragon conducts that war, namely through the two beasts. But in 12:17b the “offspring” are described in terms that tell how they will conduct themselves during that terrible conflagration—they will “obey God’s commandments and maintain their testimony for Jesus.” These two aspects, obedience and faithful witness, also are endemic to the ethical mandate to the seven churches (2:10, 25–26; 3:3, 10–11). The “commandments” of God would be all the required conduct of the book. Aune (1998a: 709–12) says they refer to the second table of the Decalogue centering on the ethical requirements for the people of God. Faithful witness is the activity of believers during that time. They are not cowering in forests and caves, hiding from their persecutors. Instead, they engage in bold witness as symbolized by the activity of the two witnesses (11:3–6).

In 13:10b, after the beast’s assault on them (13:7) and their required passivity in reaction to that attack (13:13a, allowing themselves to be taken captive or even executed), we are told, “This demands endurance and faithfulness on the part of the saints.” Here we are at the heart of the issue; these are two of the primary demands of the book, with endurance occurring seven times and πίστις (*pistis*, faith) and πιστός (*pistos*, faithful) occurring a total of twelve times. Faithfulness is the spiritual side of perseverance, demanding that one refuse to give in to the temptations and demands of the world but instead remain true to God. The two terms also appear together in 2:19 and 14:12; and in 2:10 faithfulness is defined as “faithful, even to the point of death.” Martyrdom as a possible outcome is also stressed in 13:10.

In 14:12 a similar command to 13:10 occurs after the proclamation of eternal punishment for those who follow the beast (14:9–11): “This demands the endurance of the saints, namely, that they obey God’s commandments and remain faithful to Jesus.” Here three primary ethical mandates are found: perseverance, obedience, and faithfulness. In light of the terrible end for those who fail to be true to Jesus, those who believe in him had better be faithful! The passage on punishment is framed by ethical emphases, for in 14:4–5 the saints are victorious because they “refused to defile themselves” but instead remained “virgins,” or pure from sin. The threefold command of 14:12 is followed by a promise to those whose obedience leads to martyrdom that God’s blessing will be upon them and they will be rewarded for their works (14:13). The reward is spelled out in 15:2, as the “victorious” saints are given “harps” and sing the victory song of Moses, lauding the “marvelous deeds” and “righteous acts” of almighty God. This joyful song introduces the bowl judgments and shows that they are indeed wondrous, vindicating the saints for all they have endured and demonstrating God’s justice (16:5–7).

There are two more calls for perseverance in the section on divine judgment (chaps. 6–18). First, a prophetic message from Jesus (16:15) reminds his followers that he is indeed “coming like a thief,” that is, unexpectedly, and builds upon the sins of the two most problematic churches, commanding that they “stay awake” (unlike Sardis) and “keep their clothes with them” (unlike Laodicea). These are serious warnings that judgment awaits those who fail to remain vigilant and to continue walking with the Lord. Second, those who will constitute the victorious army of Christ are “the called, the elect, and the faithful” (17:14). The first two terms occur only here in the book and describe the faithful as belonging to God and especially chosen by him. In other words, divine election and human responsibility go hand in hand in constituting the true followers of God.

The concluding promise and warning are given in 21:7–8, providing a transition from the vision of the New Jerusalem in 21:1–6 to its elaboration in 21:9–22:5. In another sense it interrupts these visions of eternal reward with a basic prophetic contrast between the overcomer and the coward, effectively summarizing this major theme. The overcomers will “inherit all this” (the “new heavens and the new earth”). Vindication and reward will become an eternal reality for the faithful. But the “cowards,” almost certainly referring to those who fail to persevere, will take their place with the sinners from the nations. The vice list of which this description is a part sums up the sins of the nations throughout the book (see on 21:8), and therefore the cowards, like the earth-dwellers, “take their place in the fiery lake of burning sulfur.” The seriousness of the issue could hardly be more powerfully stated.

Finally, the epilogue (22:6–21) has several statements on the importance of perseverance. Another prophetic message from Jesus (22:7) states that God’s blessing will now be on those who obey “the words of this prophecy,” probably a reference to this very theme of perseverance in the book. Then in 22:10 there is a parallel to 21:7–8, as the wicked sinners are told to continue in their vile deeds, while the “righteous” and “holy” are told to persevere in their walk with God. As stated in the commentary, this is a warning to the wicked similar to that in Isa. 6:9–10, stating that as they continue in their evil they will have to face a righteous God, as well as an encouragement to the saints to continue in their righteous deeds and holy living. Finally, in 22:12, 14 we learn that the returning Christ will “reward” all according to their deeds, a major emphasis of the book (also 2:23; 14:13; 18:6; 20:12, 13). This is an apt summary because those “rewards” are punishment for the wicked and blessing for the faithful. The latter group are the focus in 22:14, as “those who wash their robes” (cf. 7:14) are told they will receive “the right to the tree of life” (cf. 2:7) and to “enter the city” (cf. 21:12, 27). In other words, they have eternal reward and bliss in the New Jerusalem.

Worship. L. Thompson (1990: 53) says “the language of worship plays an important role in unifying the book,” because the worship scenes are not just “interludes” but extend the message of the book beyond visions of “things to come.” The worship scenes take the reader into the very presence of God and lift them above events to the almighty Lord. Barr (1986: 255) goes further and calls the proper worship of God the central theme of the book, especially in the sense that it is in conflict with those who worship Satan/the state. Vassiliades (1997: 102–3, 108–10) adds that Revelation is the most important NT text for understanding Christian liturgy and its relation to history because the heavenly liturgy is always connected to the historical events in the book. As deSilva (1993: 50–51) points out, the theme is introduced in 9:20, where those who worship idols are in a distinct minority, for the whole host of heaven and all the creatures worship God in chapter 7. Thus they are off center in the cosmic order. Most of the scenes that reveal who God is are worship scenes. Bauckham (1993a: 32–33) sees in the worship of chapter 4 “the two most primary forms of awareness of God: the awed perception of his luminous holiness (4:8; cf. Isa. 6:3), and the consciousness of utter dependence on God for existence itself that is the nature of all created things (4:11).” These themes not only flow throughout the book but are extended to Jesus as well as God. This is certainly part of the deity-of-Christ theme (see above), reflecting the desire to extend to Jesus the worship that in the OT could be shown only to God. This is seen in 4:11, “You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory,” as paralleled by 5:12, “Worthy is the Lamb . . . to receive . . . glory.” Both are addressed also to emperor worship, in effect saying, “Only God and the Lamb, not Caesar, are worthy of worship.” It is clear that one major emphasis in the book is that only God and Christ should be worshiped, not the emperor or angels (19:10; 22:8–9). As Barr (1998: 63) says, the scene in chapter 4 combines liturgical (worship) and political (civic) aspects, and the two flow together.

Worship in the book is always a heavenly phenomenon in contrast to the idolatrous worship of the emperor, an antidote as well as an alternative to the imperial cult (so Carnegie 1982: 254–56; Kraybill 1999: 39; R. Smith 1998b: 504; Ruiz 1997: 393). Ruiz (1992: 657–58) even goes so far as to say the hymns are not so much liturgical as political in nature, trying to draw the reader away from the symbols of the Roman cultus. This sociopolitical function can be demonstrated by noting that *προσκυνέω* (*proskyneō*, worship) occurs in heavenly scenes for the worship of God or the Lamb (4:10; 5:14; 7:11; 11:16; 15:4; 19:4; 20:4) and in earthly scenes for the worship of the evil powers (9:20; 13:4, 8, 12, 15; 14:9, 11; 16:2; 19:20). This demonstrates well the centrality of the problem of idolatry in the book. The two exceptions to this usage are 11:1, where the “worshippers” in the temple are measured, and 14:7, where the angel calls the nations to “worship” God in light of the arrival of judgment. Yet both of these demonstrate the critical theme of true worship in Revelation. Every human being will worship something, and the choice determines one’s eternal destiny. As Harrington (1993: 30) notes, “Human creatures are, as creatures, subject to some lordship. . . . The choice is of fundamental importance.” Each will be judged on the basis of that choice.

The heavenly worship scenes always occur at critical junctures in the book and provide commentary on the significance of the action. D. Peterson (1988: 68–69, 75–76) says that the worship scenes are used to interpret the events of the book and give them meaning. The scenes celebrate God’s victory in the narrative sections in hymnic form.^[11] L. Thompson (1969: 332–42) sees this as the merger of cult and eschatology. The heavenly liturgy provides a worship framework for the dramatic narrative. Thus worship is the content and setting as well as the theological underpinning of the dramas (so also Carnegie 1982: 248–50). The hymns are the centerpiece of the worship. Ford (1998: 211) shows that the hymns occur mainly in the narrative

sections (chaps. 4–19), and “all the major events of the book are accompanied by heavenly hymns.” R. Smith (1998b: 501) and Aune (1997: 314) find fifteen or sixteen hymns in the book (4:8, 11; 5:9–10, 12, 13; 7:10, 12; 11:15, 17–18; 12:10–12; 15:3–4; 16:5–7; 19:1–2, 3, 5, 6–8). In addition, one could name 14:3–5; 18:2–3, 4–8, 10, 14, 16, 19–23 (see Ford 1998: 212). Koester (1992: 248–49) finds three types: songs of a disputed sovereignty (chaps. 4–5) contra the imperial rival to the throne; songs above the spiral of terror (7:13–17; 11:15; 15:3; 19:6) in the context of terrifying judgment on the ungodly; and songs of the New Jerusalem (chaps. 21–22) on final faithfulness to God.

The central section regarding the seals, trumpets, and bowls is introduced by the vision of God and the Lamb on the throne. There are several emphases. First, God alone is worthy of worship. The basis of this is threefold: he is ultimate holiness (4:8c, “holy, holy, holy”); he is sovereign over history (4:8d), controlling past (“who was”), present (“who is”), and future (“who is to come”); and he is both creator and sustainer of “all things” (4:11b). Second, the Lamb has already been victorious (5:5) through his sacrificial death (5:6a, 9a, 12a) and thereby purchased the people of God from among the nations (5:9b). Third, the suffering saints will not only be vindicated but will reign with him (5:10). Finally, the Lamb along with God is also worthy of worship (5:12b, 13). Thus the judgment septets are introduced on a note of victory as proclaimed by worship.

Within the judgments are also several scenes of worship, proclaiming the same truth that in the midst of the conflict the triumph of God and his people is not only guaranteed but already celebrated. In the very first interlude (7:9–17) the saints are celebrating the salvation wrought by God. The seals reveal that many martyrs will come out of this period (6:9–11), but the saints will still be sealed from the hand of the evil powers. They will be killed, but God will vindicate them, and they will experience his salvation/deliverance. Their death will take them to the throne of God (7:10, 15a), where they will not only serve him (7:15b) but will have all their needs supplied by him (7:15c–17). Obviously, the forces of evil can do no *ultimate* harm to them. Then at the seventh trumpet (11:15–19), more worship celebrates the replacement of the world’s kingdom with God’s (v. 15). Before the conflict has even been described (chaps. 12–13), thanksgiving is given for the destruction of the nations by the wrath of God as well as for the final victory of God’s servants (11:17–18).

Heavenly worship frames the major interlude of the book (chaps. 12–14). The defeat of the dragon in 12:1–9 leads into acclamation for “the salvation, power, and kingdom of our God” because the “accuser” has been “thrown down” (12:10). Once more we see that the victory over Satan has already occurred via “the blood of the Lamb” (12:11). Then in 14:1–5 the 144,000 triumphant saints on Mount Zion participate in a particularly boisterous and joyful celebration (note the emphasis on loudness in v. 2), singing “a new song.” This is closely connected to the other “new song” of 5:9, and so the worship probably centers on the deliverance of the believers by the Lamb’s sacrificial act. It is clear that worship in the book plays an important role in clarifying the sovereign power of God over the forces of evil on behalf of his people. The last worship scene in the central section (chaps. 6–16) portrays an angel celebrating divine justice (16:5–6) with an antiphonal response from the altar (16:7). This is a fitting climax to this section, stressing the holiness and righteousness of God in executing his just penalty on the sinners.

Two final worship scenes bring the book to a close. First, the hallelujah choruses of 19:1–10 both conclude the judgment section of chapters 17–18 and introduce the final events of the eschaton in chapters 19–22. They are a response to the command to rejoice in light of the divine justice that was retribution “for the way [Babylon the Great] treated” the saints (18:20). First, God is worshiped for the justice of his judgments in 19:1–5. In the first hymn (19:1–2) the heavenly multitude praises

him for judging the great prostitute (see chap. 17) and for avenging the blood of his slaves (see 6:9–11). Then in the second hymn (19:3) the multitude antiphonally praises him for the eternal torment of the great prostitute (19:3; cf. 14:10–11). After this the elders and living creatures call upon God’s “slaves” on earth to join the heavenly choir in praising God (19:5). The hallelujah chorus of 19:6–8 introduces the next scene, the parousia. There are two parts, the positive aspect of the return of Christ, vindicating the saints as the bride of Christ (vv. 6–8), and the negative aspect that pictures him as the divine warrior who destroys the sinners in the final battle (19:11–21). The hymn itself celebrates the reign of God (19:6b) and God’s proclamation of “the wedding of the Lamb” in which the church is the bride (vv. 6–8).

This passage (19:1–10) forms a fitting climax to the worship scenes in the book, for it contains both aspects of worship in the book—who God is (the worthiness and majesty of God and the Lamb), and what God does (vindicating the saints and punishing the sinners). The last part needs further discussion, for people today cannot understand worshiping God for destroying the unsaved. Many have become universalists for exactly this reason: they cannot believe that a loving God can do anything in the end except forgive sinners. But this is to misunderstand the two foci of God’s character. As a holy God, he is both merciful and judging. He shows mercy to those who turn to him for forgiveness and judges those who reject his call and continue to live in sin. As said above, the total depravity of humankind means that for eternity they will reject God. The saints do not rejoice in the destruction of sinners but in the justice of God and the vindication of their suffering. The mission theme in the book shows that God seeks the repentance of the nations to the very end. Therefore, the worship scenes center on the destruction of ultimate evil and the inbreaking of the final kingdom of God.

Yet this is not the final scene of worship. The coming of the “new heaven and new earth” in 21:1–22:5 does not contain a worship scene, but worship permeates the entire section. One can say that life in the New Jerusalem is one long experience of worship. The basic reality is that finally God dwells with his people physically, and they are with him in the fullest way possible (21:3). The fulfillment of the longings of the people of God in both the old and new covenants is now complete, and they will “serve [worship] him day and night” (7:15). In this sense worship will be the primary activity in eternal bliss.

- I. Prologue (1:1–8)
- II. Churches Addressed (1:9–3:22)
- III. God in Majesty and Judgment (4:1–16:21)
- IV. Final Judgment at the Arrival of the Eschaton (17:1–20:15)
- V. New Heaven and New Earth (21:1–22:5)
- VI. Epilogue (22:6–21)

I. Prologue (1:1–8)

The Book of Revelation begins with an elaborate prologue that borrows from both prophetic and epistolary traditions. The foreword (1:1–3) is similar to several prophetic introductions (e.g., Hos. 1:1; Joel 1:1; Amos 1:1) and leads naturally to the author’s claim that this is Christian “prophecy” (1:3). There is also *inclusio* with the epilogue (22:6–21), which borrows several features (see that passage). Major themes that will define the book (e.g., the imminent eschaton, the authentication of the work as revelatory prophecy,[1] the necessity of perseverance, the identities of the Godhead) are introduced in 1:1–8 and concluded in the epilogue. The prescript (1:4–6) follows Hellenistic epistolary conventions and is similar to Pauline introductory formulas, especially in the combined Greek and Hebrew “grace and peace to you.” The section concludes with a confession or “motto” (1:7–8) that affirms the basic perspective of the book. From this the Apocalypse might be characterized as “a book of prophecy functioning as an apostolic open letter and address to the communities of Asia Minor” (Schüssler Fiorenza 1985: 170). With the epilogue reiterating the prologue, Revelation clearly addresses itself in prophetic style to the problems of the churches in Asia Minor, calling them to “hear and keep” (1:3; 22:7–8) the exhortations of the book.

- A. Foreword (1:1–3)
 - 1. Title (1:1a)
 - 2. Process of revelation (1:1b)
 - 3. Results of the revelation (1:2)
 - 4. Blessing on the reader and the “heeder” (1:3)
- B. Greeting and doxology (1:4–6))
 - 1. Greeting (1:4–5a)
 - 2. Doxology (1:5b–6)
- C. Motto and summary (1:7–8)

Exegesis and Exposition

¹This is the revelation from Jesus Christ that God gave him, so he could show his slaves those things that must soon take place. He made it known by sending his angel to his slave John, ²who bore witness to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, namely to all that he saw. ³God’s blessings are on the one who reads this and those who heed the words of this prophecy and keep what is written in it, for the time is near.

⁴I, John, am writing to the seven churches that are in Asia: May grace and peace come to you from the one who is and who was and who is to come, and also from the sevenfold Spirit who is before his throne, ⁵and also from Jesus Christ, who is the witness, the faithful one, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth.

To the one who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood. ⁶He has indeed made us royalty, priests to his God and Father,

so to him be glory and might forever. Amen.

⁷Behold, he comes with the clouds,
and every eye will see him,
even those who pierced him,
and because of him all the peoples of the earth will mourn.

May it be so! Amen!

⁸“I am the Alpha and the Omega,” says the Lord God, “who is, and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty.”

A. Foreword (1:1–3)

The foreword follows ancient conventions in stating not only the author but the purpose and contents of the work. Yet it also goes further. Both in OT prophecy and in NT epistles the author’s name comes much earlier, and there are no instances of such a foreword in canonical writings, although some may be found in second-century works (e.g., Didache and Gospel of Thomas).^[2] The expanded and highly theological nature of the preface is similar to 1 Pet. 1:1–2 with its trinitarian introduction in verse 2 and doxology in verse 3. It is interesting that some have called 1 Peter an apocalyptic epistle (e.g., Michaels 1988: xlv–xlix), for as in Revelation the purpose is to establish at the outset the divine authority behind the work. John is clearly communicating that this is not merely his set of visions, but the visions come directly from God and Christ, mediated by angels. In the crisis being faced by the churches in Asia Minor, God does not remain silent but assures his people that he is still in control. Thus 1:1–3 are at the same time a title, an eschatological summary of the contents of the book, and a prophetic exhortation as to what God’s people are to do with it.

1. Title (1:1a)

The opening words provide the origin and content of the book, which is described as Ἀποκάλυψις Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ (*Apokalypsis Iēsou Christou*, The revelation of Jesus Christ). Some (e.g., P. Hughes 1990: 15) have argued that Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ is an objective genitive and hence should be rendered, “the revelation *about* Jesus Christ,” on the grounds that Christ is the key figure in the book and that ἀποκάλυψις normally takes an objective genitive in the NT (but cf. Gal. 1:12, where it probably takes a subjective genitive; so Longenecker 1990: 24). The context certainly makes this a subjective genitive, however, and hence it should be rendered “the revelation *from* Jesus Christ” (so Swete 1911: 1; Aune 1997: 12), for it adds “God gave him [this revelation] to show his slaves” (on this see 11:18). As Giesen (1997: 56) says, “Jesus Christ is not the subject of the book but the author.” Moreover, Jesus is the revealer throughout the book. It is significant that the three times the full title “Jesus Christ” occurs in the book are found in the prologue (1:1, 2, 5). John wants the reader to understand at the outset that the same “Jesus Christ” who became incarnate, revealed himself in human flesh, died on the cross, and rose again is the one who mediates the visions in this book.

More difficult is the exact connotation of ἀποκάλυψις. In the NT the word group occurs 44 times (verb, 26; noun, 18), nearly always with the basic thrust “to uncover what has formerly been hidden” and, unlike secular Greek, with a strong religious and eschatological force. In the logia Jesu this hidden/revealed sense is especially seen in Matt. 10:26 (par.), where the time of “revelation” is almost certainly the coming of the final kingdom. In Luke 17:30 the “Son of Man” will be “revealed” at the parousia. Yet the present is also a time of revelation, for in Matt. 11:25–27 the Father “reveals” the “hidden things” to “little children” (v. 25) and the Son “reveals” the Father to whomever he “wishes” (v. 27). Paul utilizes the terms more than any other NT writer (thirteen uses each of the noun and the verb),^[3] using it generally of his own “revelatory”

experiences (cf. 2 Cor. 12:1, 7), of himself as the recipient of a “revelation” (Gal. 2:2), of his gospel as coming via a “revelation of Jesus Christ” (Gal. 1:12), of the “revelation” mediated by the Spirit to believers (1 Cor. 14:6, 30; Eph. 1:17), of the “revelation of the mystery” through the “prophetic writings” (Rom. 16:25–26; Eph. 3:3, 5), and of the “revelation” of the parousia (1 Cor. 1:7; 2 Thess. 1:7). Clearly, in Paul there is no fixed meaning for the term.

How much of this is connoted in Rev. 1:1? Surprisingly, this is the only instance of the word group in the book that bears its name. Yet the term also summarizes the content of the book, and the following “those things that must soon take place” lends it a certain “apocalyptic” air. At the end of the first century, however, there was as yet no true technical force in the term, and here it means generally “Jesus’ revelation of the imminent future,” that is, “what must soon take place.” The visions of this book are presented as an “uncovering of hidden truths,” namely the hidden reality of God’s sovereign control of the future, of how he is going to bring an end to the seeming success of the forces of evil in the present age.

2. Process of Revelation (1:1b)

There was a four-stage process by which this revelation came to the church. God gave it to Jesus; Jesus gave it to the angels; they mediated it to John; and John wrote it down for the churches. The first step is stated in the relative clause ἣν ἔδωκεν αὐτῷ ὁ θεός (*hēn edōken autō ho theos*, which God gave to him). Jesus is the obvious antecedent of αὐτῷ, and the idea of Jesus’ communicating God’s message parallels the Gospel of John (7:16–18; 8:26, 28, 38; 14:10; cf. 5:19, 30), where it is part of the chain of revelation from God to Jesus to the Holy Spirit to the disciples to the world. Here the chain is from God to Jesus to the angel to John to the churches. The sovereignty of God, central to the whole book, begins at this point. Also, a further theological point of the book begins here: God and Jesus function together throughout the book, and in 1:1 they together “show” these visions “to their slaves.”

The purpose of the communication to Jesus was δέιξαι τοῖς δούλοις αὐτοῦ (*deixai tois doulois autou*, to show his slaves). The aorist tenses of “gave” and “show” bring out the global nature of the communication process. On this point both traditional and aspectual approaches to the verb agree—the several visions are seen as a whole, coming from God to the church via “Jesus Christ.” Δείκνυμι (*deiknymi*, I show) occurs eight times in the Apocalypse, more than in any other NT book, and the next most frequent book is the Gospel of John with seven. As Schlier and Schneider note,^[4] in both books the term means “reveal, unveil,” and so parallels ἀποκάλυψις above. The Fourth Gospel contains a progression similar to the progression of this verse, for there too the Father “shows” the Son “all he does” (5:20), and the Son in turn “shows” these works to the Jews (10:32). In short, here in 1:1 Jesus “reveals” God’s “revelation” to the churches. Δούλοις could refer to Christian prophets (as in 10:7, where it designates OT prophets) but more likely describes the members of the Christian communities addressed in the seven letters as the recipients of the divine revelation.^[5] The Christians are called “slaves” (the actual meaning of the term) eleven times in this book; and as Johnson says, their designation “as the special representatives of the Lord Christ himself . . . becomes a beautiful title of honor for God’s people” (Johnson 1981: 417).

The content of the revelation is ἃ δεῖ γενέσθαι ἐν τάχει (*ha deigenesthai en tachei*, what must soon take place). As Popkes (*EDNT* 1:280) and Beale (1999: 181–82) point out, this corresponds to Dan. 2:28–29 and occurs only in the framing passages in Revelation (1:1; 4:1; 22:6; cf. 1:19). The prophecies of Daniel are seen throughout the book as coming to final fulfillment. It is obviously one of the critical framing ideas in the book, demonstrating the centrality of the perspective

regarding the divine control of imminent future events. In the Johannine writings δέῃ connotes God's will and way (cf. John 3:30; 4:20, 24). It is significant that Jesus also uses δέῃ γενέσθαι in the Olivet Discourse (Mark 13:7 par.) regarding the signs of the "end." [6] The imminent end of history is a constant theme in the NT and is at the heart of the Book of Revelation.

The phrase ἐν τάχει can mean either "soon" or "suddenly." Certainly the cognate ἔρχομαι ταχύ (*erchomai tachy*, I come quickly) in 2:16; 3:11; 11:14; 22:7, 12, 20 means "come quickly" in the sense of "without delay" rather than "swiftly," and it is unlikely that the idea of swiftness or suddenness is intended in this context. [7] In the semantic field of this concept, Rev. 1 utilizes the parallel terms ἐγγύς (*engys*, near, 1:3) and μέλλει (*mellei*, it is about to, 1:19). This emphasis on imminence produces a problem in light of the nineteen hundred years since this was written. How can it be said to have been fulfilled? Caird (1966: 12) solves the problem by having this refer to the persecution of the church by the Romans rather than the final eschaton. However, the thrust of the book as a whole makes this difficult. It is better to see this as apocalyptic language similar to that throughout the NT on the "soon" return of Christ (cf. Luke 18:8; Rom. 16:20; 1 Pet. 4:7). Such language never means that there are to be no events yet to occur, for both Christ (Matt. 13:24–30; 25:1–13) and the Apocalypse itself (6:11) realize that there will be a period of time before its fulfillment. The language of imminence intends to draw the reader into a sense of expectation and responsibility, a sense meant to characterize every age of the church. Moreover, as Sweet (1979: 58) intimates, the fulfillment takes place in stages: "The expected signs have already been set in motion by the Lamb's victory (ch. 6), and the climax in the 'desolating sacrilege' . . . and the coming of the Son of Man (19:11ff.) is at hand." In salvation history the events indicated in the book have already begun to "come to pass" and await the final consummation.

The process of revelation is further described with ἐσήμανεν (*esēmanen*, made it known), the third term in 1:1 (with "revelation" and "show") with the connotation of "revealing" God's message. This term has a special purpose, for it is the verb cognate of the Johannine term σημεῖον (*sēmeion*, sign) and yields the idea of "making known" by means of symbols. This is particularly apropos in light of the predominant symbolism of the book. It is questionable whether Christ (in keeping with the centrality of Christ in 1:1) or God is the subject of "made known" (if ἐσήμανεν parallels δεῖξαι above). While the latter is possible grammatically, Christ is the one who "shows" the revelation to the church and therefore the likely one who "signifies" it to John. The means by which these symbolic truths are to be communicated is "through his angel," and, as stated above in the introduction, angelic mediation is one of the hallmarks of apocalyptic literature. Even a brief perusal of this book proves the extent to which angels feature in the action.

Finally, the recipient of the revelation is "his slave John," the divinely chosen prophet through whom God would make it known to the church. As Hartman (1980: 132) points out, Revelation follows Jeremiah, Amos, and 1 Enoch in introducing the author in the third person, thus linking this work with those earlier works. John does not claim any special title or authority here but calls himself God's "slave," thereby aligning himself with the believers who are called "slaves" above. It is likely that John wishes to align himself with all the saints by choosing the same designation. At the same time, as Aune (1997: 16–17) says, "slave" was also a title of honor. Due to the client-patron structure of Roman society, a "slave" could "function as the agent of his master, possessing a representative authority" and with Christian leaders was often associated with "apostle" (Rom. 1:1; Titus 1:1; 2 Pet. 1:1).

3. Results of the Revelation (1:2)

The key term here is obviously the μαρτυρία (*martyria*, witness) word group, with both the verb and the noun present. John's primary function as the "servant of Christ" is to "testify" concerning two things: the "word of God" and the "testimony of Jesus." Both John and Jesus "witness" to the reality of the imminent events. In Revelation "witness" refers to fearless public proclamation and authentication, usually in the face of tremendous opposition, of divine realities in word and life. After receiving the revelation from God and Jesus via the angel (1:1), John now "testifies" or gives evidence to the church and the world[8] that these visions constitute "the word of God" and "the testimony of Jesus." The two elements of this testimony relate to the final two words, ὅσα εἶδεν (*hosa eiden*, all that he saw). Dehandschutter (1980: 285–86) argues that this refers to the trustworthiness of "the contents of the book," an emphasis also seen in 19:9; 21:5; 22:6–9. The purpose of these closing words is to clarify the content of John's witness. They are in apposition to the two preceding descriptions. A witness that authenticates the visions of the book is obviously intended here.

The two aspects, "word of God" and "testimony of Jesus," are not separate but complementary descriptions of these visions. Due to their frequent appearance in the book, they become a semitechnical formula for gospel truth and faithful Christian witness to it. Τὸν λόγον τοῦ θεοῦ (*ton logon tou theou*, the word of God) is used in Scripture for prophetic utterances as well as for the apostolic message. The phrase occurs seven times in Revelation (1:2, 9; 6:9; 17:17; 19:9, 13; 20:4). In 1:2, 9; 6:9; 20:4 the phrase has the same force it has in Acts (cf. 4:31; 6:2; 8:14; 11:1), referring to Christian witness to and proclamation of the gospel message (in 17:17 and 19:9 it refers to the revealed message of this book). The possessive genitive τοῦ θεοῦ (God's word, or perhaps the genitive of source, the word from God)[9] means that it is indeed the divine message that is connoted here in 1:2.

The message of this book is further labeled τὴν μαρτυρίαν Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ (*tēn martyrian Iēsou Christou*, the testimony of Jesus Christ). This phrase occurs six times in Revelation (1:2, 9; 12:17; 19:10 [twice]; 20:4), and in all but one passage (12:17) it is in the same context as "word of God." It is debated whether Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ is an objective genitive ("testimony about Jesus") or a subjective genitive ("testimony by Jesus Christ"). The former is favored by the other instances of the phrase in Revelation, where it refers to the "testimony" of the saints "to Jesus" (1:9; 6:9; 12:17, where it may be a general genitive; 19:10; 20:4, where it is an objective genitive). In 1:1–2, however, Jesus functions as the revealer of divine truth, and so the subjective sense is strongly favored by the context (so Giesen, Aune; Beale sees this as a general genitive as well). This is confirmed by the parallel in 22:16, where Jesus sends the angel "to testify" or "give Jesus' testimony" to the churches. Jesus' witness is added to John's in validating the divine origin of the visions written down in this book (though see 1:9, where it may well be a general genitive). Kraft (1974: 22) finds this witness primarily in Jesus' death and resurrection as producing eternal life and hope for the Christian. While this is certainly an aspect of the "witness," there is too little contextual evidence supporting this as the main meaning here.

4. Blessing on the Reader and the "Heeder" (1:3)

This is the first of seven beatitudes in Revelation. These are linked to the ethical purpose of the book, with some exhorting the saints to persevere and live exemplary lives in light of these prophecies (1:3; 16:15; 22:7), and others promising them future rewards for doing so (14:13; 19:9; 20:6; 22:14). In Revelation μακάριος (*makarios*, blessed) is used in similar fashion to the beatitudes of Matt. 5 and Luke 6, detailing both exhortation (standards expected by God) and comfort (rewards

promised for the faithful). God's blessings will be experienced by those who persevere.

In 1:3 μακάριος is followed by both singular (the reader) and plural (the hearers) subjects. As Ruiz (1992: 663) states, the emphasis on reading/hearing here and in 1:10 shows that John intended the book for oral reading in a ritual setting, namely Christian worship. The "reader" is the official reader in the Christian service. In the second century the reader was an officer of the church, but in the first century the church probably followed Jewish practice. There were normally five readers on feast days, six on the Day of Atonement, and seven on the Sabbath (though in synagogues outside Palestine there tended to be only one). "The first reader was a priest, the second a Levite, and the others members of the public; so according to the Mishnah."^[10] It is likely in the early church that elders or lay leaders in the church normally read the Scriptures, though we have no evidence as to how many readings were done. We do know that Paul's letters were often written in order to be read in the service (1 Thess. 5:27; Col. 4:16; possibly Eph. 3:4), and on the basis of Rev. 1:3 and 22:18–19 the Apocalypse also was intended to be read in the service.

The hearer is defined by two articular participles, οἱ ἀκούοντες (*hoi akouontes*, those who hear) and τηροῦντες (*tērountes*, keep, heed), that state the proper reaction to the reading of God's message in this book. One who "hears" properly must continue to "take it to heart" (NIV) or obey the instructions. These two concepts, hearing and keeping, are combined frequently in both OT and NT. In fact, the Hebrew verb for "hear" also means to "obey"; the two concepts are inseparable biblically. Again, it is in the Gospel of John that the greatest emphasis comes in NT writings. In 1:37, 40 "hearing" is linked with "following," as the Baptist's disciples come to Jesus. In 4:42 (cf. 5:24) it leads to "believing" and "knowing," in 5:25 and 5:28–29 to "life," in 8:38 to action, and in 8:47 hearing results from "belonging to God." In the parable of the good shepherd (10:3–4, 27), several of these themes are brought together, as the sheep "hear" his voice, "know" it, and then "follow" him. Hearing and keeping/obeying are combined in 12:47 and 14:23–24 (see also 14:15, 21; 15:10, 14).

In Revelation this theme is continued. In the letters to the seven churches each letter contains the admonition "Let the one who has an ear hear what the Spirit says," and this is then connected to the promise to the "overcomer" (2:7, 11, 17, 26–29; 3:6, 12–13, 21–22; cf. 13:9). The central theme of "keeping" or "observing" God's commands is found ten times in the book (1:3; 2:26; 3:3, 8, 10; 12:17; 14:12; 16:15; 22:7, 9), twice with "hear" (1:3; 3:3). The basic ethical principle of perseverance is defined throughout Revelation as "keeping" God's instructions, and this becomes one of the major themes of the book. The sovereignty of God over this world and the futility of Satan and his followers must lead to the perseverance of the saints who put their trust in God to overcome their enemies.

The content of the hearing and obeying is provided by "the words of this prophecy."^[11] Every word in Revelation is further defined as "prophecy." This tells us that John does not conceive of this writing purely as Jewish apocalyptic (which in the first century did not stem from prophets) but as linked with OT prophetic works (see Hill 1971–72). The many allusions to books like Isaiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel also attest to this. As Ladd (1957: 192–200) has said, Revelation must be characterized not as apocalyptic but as prophetic-apocalyptic. Its purpose is not merely to outline the future intervention of God or to portray the people of God symbolically in light of that divine reality but to call the saints to accountability on that basis. This is a prophetic book of warning as well as comfort to the church.

For the second time John warns (weak Christians) and promises (persevering Christians) that "the time is near" (cf. 1:1, "what must soon take place"). In this context the γάρ (*gar*, for) provides the reason for obeying the injunctions of the letter. In Revelation ἐγγύς (*engys*, near) appears only

twice (each time with **καῖρός**, *kairos*, time) but both times in critical places, here and in 22:10, thereby framing the book with the warning of the imminent eschaton. The “nearness” of the Lord’s return is used frequently in the NT to call believers to live responsibly toward God (Rom. 13:12; Heb. 10:25; James 5:8; 1 Pet. 4:7, with the cognate **ἐγγίζω**, *engizō*, draw near; Mark 13:28–29 par.; Rom. 13:11; Phil. 4:5, with **ἐγγύς**). Throughout, the focus is not just on eschatology but on ethics. In other words, in light of the fact that “the time is near,” we are called to live decisively and completely for God.

B. Greeting and Doxology (1:4–6)

The prescript, or greeting, is found throughout NT epistles. Following ancient convention, it contains three elements: the sender (John), the recipients (the seven churches in Asia), and the greeting (grace and peace). However, it differs from convention in two ways: an extensive prophetic introduction (1:1–3) precedes the normal beginning, and the greeting itself goes beyond the norm: in 1:4–5a there is a trinitarian formula, and in the doxology of 1:5b–6 John goes beyond custom to build a case for the soteriological (v. 5b) and ecclesiological (v. 6) core of the book. As Lohmeyer (1926: 7–81) has shown, the prescript or greeting in 1:4b–6 has a definite hymnic style, consisting of two successive three-part elements detailing first the triune source of “grace and peace” (vv. 4b–5a), then the work of Christ in accomplishing it (vv. 5b–6). The parallel clauses, high Christology, and liturgical style throughout^[12] lend support to this conclusion (see Deichgräber 1967: 27–28). This is interesting but too speculative. Though some have tried to argue that it was a preformed hymn, the language is Johannine, and the style, as we will see below, is too intimately connected with primary themes in the book.^[13]

1. Greeting (1:4–5a)

Most apocalyptic writings of antiquity were pseudonymous, utilizing the name of a famous personage in biblical history to add power to the message. In this case, however, the author names himself, “John” (see the introduction under “Authorship”). The addressees were “the seven churches in the province of Asia,” the same seven addressed in chapters 2–3. It is difficult to know why these particular seven churches were chosen from the many in “Asia” (the Roman province in western Asia Minor), omitting some like Colosse, just a few miles from Laodicea. Most have surmised that they were representative of the other churches. Each letter contains specific problems related to the particular churches (see on chapters 2–3); moreover, the cities are major cities in the province that are addressed in the geographical order in which a courier would deliver this letter (see below on 1:11). Therefore, John deliberately chose to address these particular seven churches but intended them to typify all the other churches (see “what the Spirit says to the churches” in 2:7, 11, etc., with the plural meant to include all churches).

The greeting itself is typical, found in most of the NT letters (often with “mercy” added). “Grace” (**χαίρειν**, *chairein*) was the common Hellenistic greeting, and “peace” (**שלום**, *šālôm*) the common Hebrew greeting. In the NT, however, these terms were “baptized” with a great deal more significance, with each one being also an eschatological promise of spiritual blessings sent from God. In other words, Christian writers were saying, “Now in Christ you can experience what was only a hope before, namely true ‘grace’ and ‘peace.’”

This is especially true here because of the deeply theological formula that follows, detailing the source from which the “grace” and “peace” will come, namely the Triune Godhead (the closest

parallel to this is the trinitarian force of 1 Pet. 1:2, but that has a quite different purpose).^[14] God is given the unique titular formula ὁ ὢν καὶ ὁ ἦν καὶ ὁ ἐρχόμενος (*ho ōn kai ho ēn kai ho erchomenos*, the one who is and who was and who is to come), a paraphrase on the divine name “Yahweh” defined in Exod. 3:14–15 as “I AM WHO I AM.” Many (e.g., Mounce 1998: 46; Krodel 1989: 82) have noted the contrast with the Hellenistic formulas of Zeus as the one “who was and who is and who will be.” However, the differences are significant, mainly the reversal of past and present and the replacement of “will be” with “is to come.” The formula occurs four other times in the Apocalypse, once in the same form (1:8) and the rest in slightly different form (4:8; 11:17; 16:5), but nowhere else in the NT. The order and form in each of the four places is highly significant. Here it is out of chronological order, with the present (“who is”) placed before the past (“who was”).^[15] This is probably a reflection of the basic apocalyptic message that God’s control of the past and future is meant to comfort the beleaguered saints by telling them that he still controls the present, even though for now it may not seem like it. Moreover, the replacement of the future “will be” with “is to come” highlights the main stress of the book, that God’s decisive intervention in history, namely the eschaton, is imminent. God’s eternal power, already seen in the past and guaranteed in the future, is still at work in the present, even if for a time he is allowing the forces of evil to have their day.

The second source, “the seven spirits that are before his [God’s] throne,” is also debated. While many think the πνευμάτων (*pneumatōn*, spirits) are angels (see additional notes for details), it is better to see this in light of Isa. 11:2 LXX (which adds a seventh virtue, “godliness,” to the six in the MT) and Zech. 4:2, 10 (with seven lamps as “the eyes of the LORD, which range throughout the earth”) as referring to the “sevenfold Holy Spirit,”^[16] with seven emphasizing the Spirit’s perfect work (so also De Smidt 1994: 241). The key is Zech. 4:6, where the “LORD Almighty” defines this action as “not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit.” As Bauckham (1993a: 110–11) brings out, the Spirit then is the means by which God will destroy the might and power of the dragon and the beast. Three other texts mention “the seven spirits”: in Rev. 3:1 Christ “holds the seven spirits of God,” showing that he is the Spirit of Christ; in 4:5 seven lamps are blazing before the throne of God, and in 5:6 the “sevenfold Spirit” is characterized even more closely with Zechariah, as the Lamb is described as having “seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth,” building on the “seven lamps . . . sent out” in Zech. 4:2. The sevenfold Spirit is both “of God” (3:1; 4:5) and of the Lamb (5:6). Swete (1911: 6) believes that the sevenfold nature of the Spirit here is also due to the fact that he ministers to the seven churches of Asia, where the Spirit is the basis of the message and the key to their understanding and obedience (“hear what the Spirit says to the churches”).

The third source of “grace and peace” is “Jesus Christ”^[17] (again the full title). As with God in 1:4, three descriptive titles are used to identify him in 1:5a, and each is a critical theme in the book as a whole. The centrality of Christology for this section can be seen in that the doxology of 1:5b–6 centers on Christ and begins with a threefold celebration of his redemptive work.^[18] In other words, verse 5a describes who he is and verses 5b–6a describe what he does, with both using a threefold approach. Beasley-Murray (1978: 56) notes an interesting possibility centering on the three stages of Jesus’ ministry: in his life he was a ὁ μάρτυς ὁ πιστός (*ho martys ho pistos*, faithful witness); in his resurrection he became ὁ πρωτότοκος τῶν νεκρῶν (*ho prōtotokos tōn nekrōn*, firstborn from the dead); and with his parousia he will become ὁ ἄρχων τῶν βασιλέων τῆς γῆς (*ho arkōn tōn basileōn tēs gēs*, ruler of the kings of the earth).

Jesus as “faithful witness”^[19] introduces a common theme in the book. The idea of “witness” in

Revelation is linked to themes of persecution (where it comes close to the later meaning of “martyr”)[20] and perseverance. Jesus is the archetype and paradigm for the believer, who also must stand against evil and idolatry even when it may mean one’s life. The witness theme is just as critical to the Gospel of John as it is to Revelation. In John 5:31–47; 8:13–18; 10:25, Jesus describes the many “witnesses” that prove who he is; and in 8:14 he describes his witness to himself as “valid” because of whence he comes. In Revelation the witness theme centers on Jesus’ witness (1:5; 3:14) as extended to the witness of the saints (1:9; 6:9; 12:11, 17; 17:6; 19:10; 20:4). The idea of “faithfulness” is also an important theme, linked to the central message of perseverance (see the introduction under “Theology”), namely maintaining one’s witness against the powers of evil (17:14) even to the point of death (2:10, 13).

There are two primary emphases in **πρωτότοκος**: sovereignty over life and death, and Jesus as the prototype for those who would be raised with him. In the first sense, this is an allusion to Ps. 89:27 LXX, where David is described as God’s “firstborn, the most exalted of the kings of the earth” (note the similarity of the second half of this verse to the title “ruler of the kings of the earth” that follows). The “firstborn” was the next head of the family in Judaism, the one who controlled the inheritance. As the firstborn, Jesus is the exalted Messiah, an emphasis repeated in Col. 1:15 (“firstborn over all creation,” which means not the “first one born” but the supreme or sovereign Lord over creation), Rom. 8:29 (“firstborn among many brothers”), and Heb. 1:6 (“God brings his firstborn into the world”). In the second sense, we see not just who Jesus is but what he has done on our behalf by making our resurrection possible. This is the emphasis in NT passages like Col. 1:18 and 1 Cor. 15:20 (“firstfruits [a different but similar term] of those who have fallen asleep”). In the context of the Book of Revelation, both ideas are present: Christ has taken control of death and will destroy it (20:14) so that death will be “no more” (21:4), and all the faithful will share in his exaltation (2:7, 11; 20:6; 22:2–3, 14, 17).

Jesus as **ὁ ἄρχων τῶν βασιλέων τῆς γῆς** is also built on the Davidic imagery of Ps. 89:27. The same Christ who is sovereign over life and death would naturally “rule” the “kings of the earth.” The conflict between the exalted Christ and earthly rulers is extensive in Revelation. The “kings” are the enemies of Christ (10:11; 17:18), filled with evil (17:2; 18:3), who will gather for the final war (16:14; 17:14; 19:19) and be utterly defeated (6:15–17; 17:14; 18:9ff.; 19:18). At the same time they are the object of mission and will submit their glory in the final analysis to the exalted Lord (21:24). Herod, Pilate, and Caesar are earthly rulers, but Jesus Christ is the “King of kings and Lord of lords” (19:16); and only he, not Caesar, is worthy of worship (see also 11:15 and 12:10—this is another hint of the opposition to the imperial cult in this book).

2. Doxology (1:5b–6)

As the titles refer to the person of Christ, the doxology (others are found in 4:9–11; 5:13; 7:12; 19:1–2) now celebrates his work and his relation to his followers. As Aune (1997: 46) brings out, this is the first doxology in the NT addressed only to Christ. Christians today as well as then too easily take for granted the redemptive work of Christ. How can we reflect at any length upon his love and work without breaking into spontaneous praise? The first aspect worthy of praise is his “love.” The present substantival participle **τῷ ἀγαπῶντι** (*tō agapōnti*, the one who loves) is an all-embracing concept that probably summarizes Christ’s past love leading to his sacrificial death (see Rom. 8:37; Gal. 2:20; Eph. 5:2, 25; Rev. 5:6, 9, 12; 7:14; 12:11; 13:8), his present love (here), and his future love seen in his defeat of the forces of evil on our behalf. Interestingly, the divine love is mentioned in only two other places, 3:9 (for the church of Philadelphia) and 20:9 (“the city [of God’s

people] he loves”). However, an atmosphere of divine love for his suffering people permeates the book. The vindication of the people of God for their sacrifice and faithfulness is a result of this love.

This love of Christ was especially demonstrated in his atoning “blood” that has “freed us from our sins.” Again his work and its effects are emphasized. In the aorist λύσαντι (*lysanti*, loosed or freed) the present love of Christ is exemplified in his past sacrificial death. As already stated, two phrases predominate in the book for this redemptive work, the “slain Lamb” (5:6, 12; 13:8) and the sacrificial “blood” (5:9; 7:14; 12:11; perhaps 19:13). K. Hanson (1993: 216–17) points out that “blood” appears nineteen times in the book and is a symbol of both life and death. The theme of blood, he says, is “a dominant ritual symbol” in the Apocalypse, building on the sacrificial theology of Leviticus. It is clear that Christ has conquered first through his blood sacrifice, and that the martyrdom of the saints is a reexperiencing of Jesus’ victory over Satan (see 12:11). Here, however, the emphasis is on the atoning effects of his death, in that it has “freed” us “from our sins.” One of the basic meanings of λύω (*lyō*) is indeed “setting free,” but as Kertelge (*EDNT* 2:368) points out, this is virtually the only place in the NT where the verb has redemptive connotations. Nevertheless, this makes great sense, for λύω is a cognate of the redemption terms λύτρον (*lytron*, means of redemption) and ἀπολύτρωσις (*apolytrōsis*, setting free/release). The concept of ἁμαρτία (*hamartia*, sin) is found only twice elsewhere in Revelation (18:4, 5), where it speaks of the sins of the harlot Babylon, so this is undoubtedly a piece of tradition used to begin the theme of redemption in the book. While the sins of the enemies of God continue to pile up in readiness for divine judgment, the sins of those who have turned to God have already been “loosed” by the “blood” of Christ.

The third aspect of Christ’s work that is worthy of praise is his inclusion of us in his royal and priestly office, ἐποίησεν ἡμᾶς βασιλείαν, ἱερεῖς τῷ θεῷ καὶ πατρὶ αὐτοῦ (*epoiēsen hēmas basileian, hiereis tō theō kai patri autou*, made[21] us to be a kingdom, priests to [serve] his God and Father). Here the ecclesiological aspect of Christ’s work is described, alluding to Exod. 19:6, “You will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation,” one of the primary covenant promises in the Torah (cf. Isa. 61:6). Ford (1993: 249–50) states that the church here is seen as a new exodus community (note the *inclusio* with 20:6), fulfilling the high priestly role of the OT. She notes an interesting development in the three texts on this theme: in 1:5–6 the saints are the objects of Christ’s action, in 5:10 they worship and look forward to the kingdom on earth, and in 20:6 they actually reign on earth. This is part of that NT tradition that viewed the church as the true Israel. The Exodus passage is also behind 1 Pet. 2:9, “You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation . . . ,” which combines it with Isa. 43:20–21 to describe the believers as the true people of God. Interestingly, both 1 Peter and Revelation center on the problem of persecution and suffering and are trying to comfort the beleaguered saints by reminding them that they are indeed God’s special people. The verb ἐποίησεν[22] in this context probably has the same force as in Jesus’ commissioning of the Twelve in Mark 3:14, which says he “appointed (ἐποίησεν) twelve . . . apostles” (election language; cf. also 1:17, “I will make you fishers of men”; and Acts 2:36, “God has made this Jesus . . . both Lord and Christ”). It is not drawn from Exod. 19:6 but is added by John to picture divine “appointment” to a high office (see Schüssler Fiorenza 1985: 72). That office is described in the grammatically difficult word pair βασιλείαν (*basileian*) and ἱερεῖς (*hiereis*), with the plural “priests” in apposition to the singular “king.” Each of the three NT allusions differs, with 1 Pet. 2:9 reading βασίλειον ἱεράτευμα, and Rev. 5:10 reading βασιλείαν καὶ ἱερεῖς. While most scholars take the 1 Peter rendition adjectivally (“royal priesthood”), the two Revelation passages take the Exodus tradition as separate (see further the additional notes), with 5:10 making explicit what is implicit in 1:6, “kingdom (and)

priests.” They are a “kingdom” in the sense not only of inhabiting God’s kingdom (i.e., the realm within which God reigns) but also of ruling with Christ in it (i.e., royalty); in other words, the abstract “kingdom” (taking the singular noun in a corporate sense) stands also for the concrete “king.” The concept of the saints participating in God’s rule occurs frequently (2:26, “authority over the nations”; 3:21, “sit with me on my throne”; 5:10, “reign on the earth”; 20:4, “authority to judge”; 20:6, “reign with him”). Bandstra (1992: 16–18, 21–23) sees here the church as the fulfillment of the OT promises. The “kingship” is active and means to “rule in his name.” It should be understood in an inaugurated sense, referring to Christ’s rule now as an anticipation of the future.

The saints are not only rulers but also ἱερεῖς.^[23] The only two places in the OT that describe the nation of Israel in priestly terms are Exod. 19:5–6 and Isa. 61:6, “You will be called priests of the LORD.” Scholars are somewhat divided as to whether the priestly office meant serving and enjoying access to God or also included the idea of mission to the nations.^[24] The same is true here. Most scholars have interpreted this in keeping with Rom. 12:1; Heb. 10:19–20; and 1 Pet. 2:5 to mean “spiritual sacrifices” or worship, but Caird (1966: 17) sees in this the idea of mission to the world: “Ought we not therefore to expect that they are to share his priestly office also, and not be a body through which he can exercise his redemptive as well as his regal power?” While it is difficult to demonstrate with any probability that this theme occurs this early (however, see below on 1:7), there is a definite mission motif in this book, as I attempt to show in passages like 5:9; 7:9; 14:6–7; 15:4; 21:24–26. It is possible that the mission theme begins in 1:6, although the surrounding context makes it secondary here. Nevertheless, it does prepare for 1:7 and the theme elsewhere in the book. John most likely has in mind primarily the spiritual life of the believer. As “priests,” the people of God have both direct access to God (privilege; cf. Heb. 10:19–20) and the task of serving him (responsibility; cf. Rom. 12:1). In the same way that Christ’s priestly work led to his sacrificial death, the saints are to conduct their lives in sacrificial service “to his God and Father,” that is, “the one who is both God and Father to Jesus.” Calvin (1949: 2.262–63) captured the idea best when he said (on John 20:17), “Christ calls Him *his God*, in so far as, *by taking upon him the form of a servant, he humbled himself* (Phil. 2:7). This is, therefore, peculiar to his human nature, but it is applied to his whole person, on account of the unity, because he is both God and man.” The point in this context is that when we participate with Christ in his priestly office, we are serving the same “God and Father” that he did.

In spite of the persecutions and suffering that the saints are enduring, John wants them to know that they already inhabit a high position with Christ before God. The world is now in seeming control, but Christ has already entered the world and as a result of his “love” has “freed” them from the burdens of their sins and made them part of his kingdom, in which they are both royalty and priests. Their reign with him has already begun, even though it is yet to be consummated. Here the inaugurated eschatology of the book must be applied. That reign has begun (note the past tenses in 1:5–6), but the thesis of the book is that it has not yet been finally culminated (although that culmination is imminent). In the present the believers are to persevere in their service to God and thus to participate anew in Jesus’ priestly work.

The doxology proper occurs in 1:6b and is the natural response to the threefold work of Christ in 1:5b–6a. The introductory αὐτῷ (*autō*, to him) in the dative case picks up the two articular participles in 1:5, “to the one who loves . . . and has freed us . . . to him be. . . .” Such a doxology is unusual after a greeting (elsewhere only in Gal. 1:5 and 1 Pet. 1:3, both times addressed to God). Formally, the Galatians passage is closer, but theologically the 1 Peter passage provides a better

parallel, namely to comfort in times of trouble with the knowledge of God's redemptive work on their behalf. The adoration of Christ in terms of his "glory and power" reminds the reader that only he (and not Caesar or any earthly power) is worthy of worship, for only he can effect redemption. The attribution of ἡ δόξα καὶ τὸ κράτος (*hē doxa kai to kratos*, glory and power) to Christ occurs also in the doxology of 5:13 (combined with "praise and honor"; cf. also 7:12), where it again is linked to his redemptive work (5:9–10, 12). While "power" appears only twice in the Apocalypse (1:6; 5:13), it is an important concept and connotes the idea not only of "power" but also of "dominion." It is primarily liturgical in the NT, with six of its twelve occurrences coming in doxologies, especially in 1 Peter (4:11 of Christ and 5:11 of God) and Revelation (1:6 of Christ and 5:13 of both God and Christ). As von der Osten-Sacken states, in both books it "is to be explained from the persecution facing the churches. In the praise of the sovereign power of God these predications express the certainty of the divine victory over the powers that now confront the church" (EDNT 2:315–16).^[25] "Glory" (ἡ δόξα, *hē doxa*) is far more frequent (occurring seventeen times) and also celebrates the superior work and worth of God and Christ in defeating the powers of evil and effecting salvation. Here δόξα is more than "praise" but with κράτος connotes the "splendor" or "glory" of the King of kings, the sovereign Lord of the universe. In both terms there is a decided contrast to the imperial cult—only God and Christ, not Caesar, has dominion and is worthy of "glory." Finally, this doxology celebrates the εἰς τοὺς αἰῶνας [τῶν αἰώνων] (*eis tous aiōnas [tōn aiōnōn]*, eternal) nature of the divine "glory and power," possibly again in contrast to the temporary and partial "glory and power" of Caesar. In the troubles of the present, the readers needed to know there was a sovereign power that transcended the temporal and guaranteed the future for God's people. The doxology concludes with ἀμήν (*amēn*, amen), which occurs eight times in Revelation, seven of them as here concluding liturgical worship. It carries its OT meaning of "so be it," authenticating and guaranteeing the efficacy of the worship. Found at the end of most NT doxologies (e.g., Rom. 1:25; 11:36; 15:33; Eph. 3:21; Phil. 4:20; Heb. 13:21), it also means the commitment of the writer and readers to the truth found in the worshipful utterance.^[26]

C. Motto and Summary (1:7–8)

The subject matter or topic of the book is now described in a prophetic annunciation presented in a highly liturgical, even hymnic (see the discussion of the strophic arrangement in Lohmeyer 1926: 10), format that at one and the same time provides the contents of the "revelation" of 1:1 as well as a prophecy presented in OT style. There are four elements in the parousia pronouncement, and these conflate two OT texts, Dan. 7:13 and Zech. 12:10, in reverse order of the Son of Man saying in Matt. 24:30, "At that time the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and all the nations of the earth will mourn. They will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky, with power and great glory" (see also John 19:37, "They will look on the one they have pierced," from Zech. 12:10). Thus John is probably drawing on a traditional saying stemming from the logia Jesu (so also Vos 1965: 67–71).

Here the Danielic "coming with the clouds of heaven" has precedence, followed by Zechariah's "They will look on me, the one they have pierced, and they will mourn for him." The Danielic passage tells of the "one like a son of man" who will "come" to establish an "everlasting dominion" in "glory and sovereign power" (Dan. 7:14; cf. "glory and power" in 1:6 above). The Danielic image is implied throughout 1:4–8 and is a major force in Revelation as a whole (Dan. 7 is one of the most frequently used passages in the book), focusing as it does on an eternal kingdom established by God. Zechariah 12:10–14 foretells the repentance of Israel, with every element of the nation (tribe,

clan, family) “weeping” and “mourning” for “the one they have pierced.” The key is 12:10a, “I will pour out on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit of grace and supplication.” In 12:1–9 God would give his people victory over the nations, and in 12:10–14 he would send them repentance. If this is the case for Zechariah, the **κόψονται** (*kopsontai*, they will mourn) here in 1:7 may also refer to tears of repentance, and John may be building on this to indicate the conversion of the nations (replacing Israel with “all the peoples of the earth”). Caird (1966: 18–19) argues on this basis that “look on . . . and lament for him” means not remorse in the light of impending judgment but penitential grief (also Sweet, Kraft, Harrington, Boring, Wall). Hultberg (1995) believes that the added “all the tribes of the earth” alludes to Gen. 12:3 and introduces the idea of the blessings of the nations in the Abrahamic covenant. This is also linked to the eschatological war of Zech. 12 and 14 and its connection with cosmic war in Revelation. Thus the eschatological victory of God over his enemies (Zech. 14:1–15) has led to the repentance of the nation (Zech. 12:10) and of the nations (Zech. 14:16 = Rev. 1:7). Beale (1999: 196–97) notes the two significant additions to the Zechariah text (“every eye” and “of the earth”) and states that the repentance of Israel in Zechariah has been expanded to the repentance of the nations, specifically those who believe. In spite of the evidence in Zechariah, however, most have traditionally thought it a mourning for judgment (Beckwith, R. Charles, Moffatt, Lenski, Ladd, Morris, Krodel, Chilton, Giesen, Mounce). They believe that mourning for sin is a possible reading but has difficulties. The closest parallel is Rev. 18:9, a clear judgment context, “And the kings of the earth . . . will weep and mourn over her [Babylon] when they see the smoke of her burning”; and Matt. 24:30 shows how the “nations of the earth mourn” in apparent consternation as only the elect are taken.

The immediate context is ambiguous. There is a good possibility that the “seven golden lampstands” of Rev. 1:12 connotes the evangelism of the nations (see below), and that would allow a reading of “mourn in repentance” here. On the whole, it is likely that a deliberate ambiguity is introduced here, with the reader expected to see a repentance theme in light of the Zechariah parallel and yet a judgment theme in light of the switch from Israel in Zechariah to “the peoples of the earth” here. This ambiguity continues throughout the book, as the conversion of the nations and the judgment of the nations develop side by side.

John himself provides the introductory **ἴδου** (*Idou*, Behold), a term used twenty-six times in the book to highlight critical prophetic oracles. As elsewhere it means “pay attention” or “listen carefully.” The parousia of Christ (**ἔρχεται**, *erchetai*, comes)^[27] is one of the primary foci of Revelation, culminating in the coming of the “King of kings and Lord of lords” in judgment in 19:11–16. On three other occasions (16:15; 22:7, 12) **ἴδου** leads into an oracle from Christ himself centering upon a first-person proclamation by Jesus of his “coming.” In each case imminence is stressed (“like a thief” in 16:15 and “soon” in 22:7, 12), and Jesus as the “coming one” is found eleven times in the book. The emphasis on **μετὰ τῶν νεφελῶν** (*meta tōn nephelōn*, with the clouds) is a common apocalyptic image used often of Christ’s return (Mark 13:26 par.; 14:62 par.; 1 Thess. 4:17). Longman is probably correct when he sees this as part of the “divine warrior” theme.^[28] The Book of Revelation contains a great deal of this imagery, as Yahweh goes to war against the dragon and his followers. In the OT the “clouds” metaphor derived from the “clouds” raised by war chariots, and this is probably connoted here.

The **πᾶς ὀφθαλμός** (*pas ophthalmos*, every eye) that will “see him” and the **οἵτινες** (*hoitines*, those who)^[29] who “pierced him” are identified in the fourth clause as “all the peoples of the earth.” These are obviously the nonbelievers in the book who oppose God and his people. These would include both Jews and Gentiles responsible for placing Christ on the cross (“pierced him”) but

should be expanded also to embrace all of fallen humanity (who in a spiritual sense put Christ on the cross). Bauckham (1993b: 319–22) takes a position similar to Caird above. He believes that “all the tribes [peoples]” (Zechariah has the “tribes” of Israel) is an allusion to Ps. 71:17b LXX (72:17b MT) and through it to Gen. 12:3 and 28:14, the Abrahamic promise that “all the tribes of the earth will be blessed.” If this is true, “mourn” refers to godly sorrow and repentance and will favor Caird’s interpretation. Once again, this is a viable interpretation and certainly fits later emphases on the conversion of the nations seen in 14:6–7; 15:4; 21:24–26. As stated above, however, it is likely that the judgment theme is also present in 1:7. When John relates that “every eye will see” the one they “pierced,” there is probably a double meaning: “see” at the moment of conviction of sin and also “see” at the parousia, when the time for repentance is over.^[30] In the latter sense “mourning” refers to the conversion of some “people” but also to the “weeping and mourning” of the kings in 18:9 (the only other occurrence of κλαύω, *klauō*, I weep) over the destruction of the harlot Babylon. The ἐπ’ αὐτόν (*ep’ auton*, because of him) is not found in the Matt. 24:30 parallel and probably refers to Christ the savior and judge as the cause (causal ἐπί) of their “mourning.”

The ναί, ἀμήν (*nai, amēn*, May it be so! Amen!) frames 1:7 (ἀμήν comes at the end of v. 6 as well) with liturgical affirmation but is made even stronger than 1:6 by combining the Greek (ναί) and Hebrew (אַמֵּן) forms of the authenticating particle. As above, this affirmation combines both the divine imprimatur and the response of the community to the truth of the assertion.

To the “amen” of Christ and the community is added the direct voice of κύριος ὁ θεός (*kyrios ho theos*, the Lord God).^[31] Only here and in 21:5–6 does God speak directly, and in both places τὸ Ἄλφα καὶ τὸ Ὠ (to *Alpha kai to Ō*, the Alpha and the Omega) appears. There is a distinct *inclusio* as the voice and personhood of God “frame” the book as a whole. The three titles here also act as a summary of the message of the prologue. As Bauckham (1993a: 25) observes, “This strategically placed verse incorporates three of the four most important designations for God in Revelation.” “Alpha” and “Omega” are of course the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet, but at the same time they summarize the other letters. This title is therefore saying that God controls the beginning and the end (22:13 defines the title as “the first and the last, the beginning and the end”) as well as everything in between. In other words, God is sovereign over history; it is all summed up in him. Of the three uses of this title in Revelation, two refer to God (1:8; 21:6) and one to Christ (22:13, though see 1:17, where Jesus is “the first and the last”). From the start the unity of the Father and the Son is stressed. Here God is “the Alpha and the Omega” and Jesus is “the first and the last” (1:17). In 21:6 God is “Alpha and Omega,” and in 22:13 Jesus is “Alpha and Omega” (see Bauckham 1993a: 54–58).

A neglected aspect of the titles for God here is “Lord.” It should be connected with “I am” to stress God as the Yahweh of the OT. The “I am” is emphasized here by the presence of Ἐγὼ εἰμι (*egō eimi*, I am), used throughout the Gospel of John to emphasize the deity of Christ and to recall the sacred tetragrammaton YHWH of Exod. 3:14. The God who speaks is Yahweh, Lord of the universe. As Swete (1911: 11) notes, “LORD God” is commonly used in the prophets, especially Ezekiel, and is fitting in this prophetic prologue. The next title, “who is and who was and who is to come,” repeats the title from verse 4 and once again brings in the nuance of the eternal God who unites past, present, and future under his sovereign control. The final title, ὁ παντοκράτωρ (*ho pantokratōr*, the Almighty), provides a fitting conclusion for the preface. In the LXX it frequently translates the OT title “LORD of Hosts” (cf. 2 Sam. 5:10; Jer. 5:14; Amos 3:13; et al.), stressing throughout the prophets the omnipotence and authority of God over all earthly forces. It occurs nine times in Revelation (1:8; 4:8; 11:17; 15:3; 16:7, 14; 19:6, 15; 21:22; elsewhere only in 2 Cor. 6:18 in an OT quotation), always with the connotation of God’s absolute power and control. In a sense all of Rev. 1:8 looks to

God as ruler over all of history, in control of this world and the next, with full authority over earthly and cosmic forces. It provides a fitting climax to the prologue of 1:1–8.

Summary and Contextualization

More so than in most epistles, the prologue here introduces not only the book but also many of the major themes of the rest of the work. Each part of this critical section is important to the whole of the Apocalypse. The foreword (1:1–3) tells us what kind of work it will be (apocalyptic) and the source of the visions (from God to Christ to an angel to John to the churches). There is a distinct prophetic aura that tells the reader that God is directly revealing this through John to us. We must take it extremely seriously and listen closely (a warning that will be repeated in the seven letters, 2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22). For those who do heed, God’s blessing will be poured out (1:3). The key is that both hearing and obeying are required, and it is clear that the theme of perseverance, so essential to this book, is here introduced.

The greeting and doxology (1:4–6) introduce key themes about the Trinity and the character of the believers addressed in the book. God is described as eternal and sovereign over history; the Holy Spirit (the “sevenfold Spirit”) is “before the throne,” and Jesus is the archetypal witness as well as sovereign over both death and all earthly rulers. It is Jesus who has made the resurrection life available to God’s people. It is also Jesus whose love led him to pay the price for our sins and to free us from our bondage to sin. Finally, it is Jesus who has allowed us to share this with him, so that we too can be both royalty and priesthood in our service to God. Included in this is the concept of mission; we are to bring God’s message to a lost world, a theme that is elaborated in 1:7. Our response is in the doxology, as we attribute “glory and power” to Christ for all eternity.

The final section (1:7–8) introduces the basic apocalyptic reality of Revelation: The parousia is imminent, and all peoples of the earth will see him and must respond. Here is one of the basic tensions of the book. The nations are the object of both mission (the connotation of Zech. 12:10–14) and judgment (another major theme in this book). It is our task to participate in the former and to let God take care of the latter. There is also a definite inaugurated eschatology here. We are to engage in God’s mission to the world in light of the imminent expectation of the parousia. Finally, God reveals himself as the “Alpha and Omega,” the one who is sovereign over history and who has the power (“the Almighty”) to end it when he so decides.

Additional Notes

1:1. Some scholars have argued that 1:1–3 was written after the book was completed and thus is a secondary addition (e.g., Ford 1975b: 375, believes that similarities to the portions of John 1 concerning John the Baptist mean this passage was penned by one of the Baptist’s disciples). This, however, is unnecessary, for the language and themes are closely related to the book as a whole and prepare for the material to follow. Moreover, 1:1–3 and 22:6–7 form an *inclusio*, introducing the prologue (1:1–8) and epilogue (22:6–21), respectively. This fits too closely with what follows to have been written later.

1:2. ἑμαρτύρησεν: As many have realized, “witness” is one of the key theological concepts in the book. Here John bears witness to the revelation from Jesus; in 22:18 the angel bears witness to the truths of the book; in 15:5 the heavenly temple is called “the tabernacle of testimony”; in 11:3, 7 the two witnesses testify to the overcoming power of God; in 6:9; 12:11; and 17:6 the saints bear witness via suffering and death. Throughout this book “witness” refers to both verbal and lifestyle stances for Christ in the face of terrible pressure from both the courts and the surrounding populace. As Trites (1977: 154–74) observes, Revelation draws its use especially from the law court metaphor. “Witness” is the fearless presentation of evidence to the truth and efficacy of Jesus in the face of opposition. In this sense Revelation follows the use of the term in the Gospel and Epistles of John, which have the most frequent use of this word group in the NT. Throughout John’s writings “testimony” authenticates the reality of who Jesus is and what he does (cf. esp. John 5:31–40; 8:12–18). In the Apocalypse the “testimony” of God’s people is a participation in Jesus’

testimony, both in terms of living witness and witness via suffering and death. On the possible connection between “witness” and martyrdom, see 2:13 below.

As Thomas (1992: 57–58) points out, the aorist ἐμαρτύρησεν has been understood in three ways: (1) as a reference back to John’s previous writings—unlikely in light of the following “all that he saw”; (2) as a constative aorist summarizing the contents of Revelation and assuming that 1:1–3 were penned after the book had been written—a view rendered unlikely in the additional note on verse 1 above; (3) as an epistolary aorist, written from the standpoint of the readers (Thomas’s view; see also Swete 1911: 3; Morris 1987: 47). The last view is the most likely.

1:3. Boring (1989: 68–70) notes seventeen places that emphasize the nearness of the end (1:1, 3; 2:16, 25; 3:11, 20; 6:11; 10:6; 11:2–3; 12:6, 12; 17:10; 22:6, 7, 10, 12, 20). The presence of eleven of them in the introductory and closing sections (chaps. 1–3, 22) shows that this is a critical emphasis for the church.

1:4. Hemer (1986: 14–15) asks, “Why not Magnesia and Tralles, which had well-established churches when Ignatius wrote, and which were much greater cities than Thyatira and Philadelphia? Why not Troas, where Paul had found an open door (2 Cor. 2:12; cf. Acts 20:6–12)?” Building on Ramsay’s work, he argues that these seven cities were recognized already in the first century as a group because they had “acquired a special importance as organizational and distributive centres for the church of the area.” In other words, they were the best choice for getting the message out to the whole of Asia Minor. Johnson (1981: 420) suggests that seven were also chosen for numerical significance, since as the number of completeness seven is the key number in the Book of Revelation. Mounce (1998: 45) believes these seven were chosen because of their special relationship to the imperial cult, which was a major problem for Christians in Asia Minor. Finally, the problems addressed in chapters 2 and 3 were also both specific to each church and representative of the problems experienced by all the churches (today as well as in the 1st century). This is why each of the seven letters concludes with “May those who have ears hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”

1:4. There are two grammatical anomalies in the formula for God here. First, the preposition ἀπό should be followed by the genitive, but instead the three phrases are in the nominative. This can best be accounted for by recognizing the titular nature of this ascription. As a title for God, it is indeclinable (see Beckwith 1919: 424). Second, the three phrases have two participles surrounding a finite verb (ἦν). However, this can be explained by the fact that there is no past participle of εἰμί, so the finite verb had to be used. Moreover, the past participle of γίνομαι would have been problematic, since some could have read a process of becoming into that verb, and that would not fit the immutable God of the Hebrews.

1:4. There are four views for “the sevenfold Spirit who is before his throne” (cf. also 3:1; 4:5; 5:6): (1) Building on Babylonian astral religion as reflected in intertestamental speculation,^[32] some see these as seven archangels, perhaps Uriel, Raphael, Raguel, Michael, Saraqa’el, Gabriel, and Remiel of 1 Enoch 20.1–8 (cf. Tob. 12:15; 2 Esdr. [4 Ezra] 4:1) (so Krodel 1989: 83); (2) they are seven angels, probably the seven to whom the letters are written in chapters 2–3 (cf. 1:20) (so R. Charles, Mounce, Walvoord; Aune 1997: 34 calls them “the seven principal angels of God”); (3) this is the “sevenfold Holy Spirit,” building on OT allusions (see exposition above), stressing his “sevenfold” completeness (so Bruce 1973: 336; Beasley-Murray; Johnson; Metzger; Chilton; Beale) or perhaps his complete work to the seven churches (Swete 1911: 5–6) or simply the work of the Spirit, with “seven” coming from the Zechariah imagery and not overly emphasized (Beckwith, Hemer);^[33] (4) it refers symbolically to the complete (“seven”) or perfect activity of God and Christ in the world (Harrington 1993: 46; Giesen 1997: 75–76). The first is the least likely, for there is insufficient evidence that John is drawing from Jewish astral speculation here (contra Malina 1995: 65). The “angel” interpretation is viable but has several drawbacks: the term “spirit” is not used of angels elsewhere in this book, and it is hard to see why John would not have used the term “angels” if he meant angels. Also, while angels are coupled with the Father and Son elsewhere, the invocation and doxological flavor of this section make it less likely here. The possibility that it symbolizes God’s perfect work is attractive and fits the book as a whole, but it is somewhat clumsy in this context that names the “seven spirits” as one of the three sources of the letter. The Zech. 4 background makes it probable that John has in mind the Holy Spirit here. Whether it is a “sevenfold” work is a further debate. Swete, Beckwith, and Hemer doubt this because there are only six characteristics in Isa. 11:2, and the sevenfold nature is only in the LXX, which is not used overmuch in Revelation. With seven the number of completeness in the book and with the Isaianic imagery being well known in Judaism, however, the sevenfold work is still superior.

1:5. The TR, following later manuscripts (P 046 94 1006 et al.), supports λούσαντι ἀπό over λύσαντι ἐκ (found in better manuscripts: □¹⁸ C A C 1 2020 et al.). As Metzger (1994: 662) says, the one preferred in UBS⁴ fits better the OT imagery (Isa 40:2 LXX) and the emphasis of the immediate context. The error may have been one of hearing, since the two verbs may sometimes have been pronounced alike, and the preposition ἀπό was added as more appropriate to λούαντι.

1:6. There is a difficult text-critical problem here, in that C 046 1 94 and many other early witnesses contain τῶν αἰώνων, while □¹⁸ A P and others omit the term. On eleven other occasions in the book the longer form occurs, so scribes could have accidentally omitted it, but it is also possible that the other witnesses could have added the term in light of the other occasions. On the whole, it is probably better cautiously to accept the longer form.

1:6. The MT for Exod. 19:6 has מַלְאָכָיו וְנָתַתִּי בָם רוּחִי, and this is correctly translated in the LXX βασιλεῖον ἐράτευμα, a reading that 1 Pet. 2:9 follows exactly. Revelation 1:6 has a similar reading to that of Symmachus and Theodotion (in the Lagarde edition of the

Syro-Hexaplar, though not in the Göttingen and Cambridge editions), seeing “kingdom” and “priest” as separate but connected nouns rather than as a single idea. In this sense the emphasis is not “a kingdom made up of priests” but “a kingdom and priests.”

1:6. The significance of the aorist ἐποίησεν is debated. Some (e.g., Beckwith 1919: 429; Thomas 1992: 71) believe the aorist refers to what is potentially realized, with the actual event still in the future. This is unlikely, however, and the force is almost certainly the same as the aorist participle λύσαντι, pointing to what Jesus accomplished on the cross. As a result of his divine “love,” Jesus died on the cross, “freeing us from sin” and “appointing” us “kings and priests.”

1:6. The formula τῷ θεῷ καὶ πατρὶ αὐτοῦ is somewhat unusual. In Paul it is nearly always “our Father” rather than “his Father,” but on several occasions it is still used of Jesus in the formula “God (and) Father of our Lord Jesus Christ” (cf. Rom. 15:6; 2 Cor. 1:3; Eph. 1:3; Col. 1:3; 1 Pet. 1:3). Both aspects are combined in John 20:17, “I am returning to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.” This is certainly a traditional formula utilized by John to add to the liturgical force of the statement.

As L. Thompson (1990: 54–55) points out, the doxology of 1:6b, like all the doxologies of this book, contains three elements, paralleling the three titles of God (1:4b–5a) and the threefold work of Christ (1:5b–6a): the designation of the recipient (“to him”), the doxological ascriptions (“glory and power”), and the temporal limits (“forever and ever”).

1:7. The use of Dan. 7:13 and Zech. 12:10 is complicated by the fact that neither the MT nor the LXX seems to be behind the readings. For instance, the use of the preposition μετὰ from Dan. 7:13 does not follow the LXX ἐπὶ. Matthew 24:30 does utilize the LXX reading, but the parallels in Mark (13:26) and Luke (21:27) use ἐν. It is certainly possible that all go back to the MT, and I agree with Thomas (1992: 82) that there is not a great deal of difference in the meaning of the various prepositions. The Zechariah allusion seems once more (see 1:6) to flow from Theodotion, especially in the use of ἐξεκέντησαν rather than the LXX, which has κατορχέω. This parallels the Zech. 12:10 quotation also in John 19:37 (also with ἐκκεντέω, although there the context is the crucifixion rather than the parousia).^[34] Yarbrow Collins (1992b: 538–43) argues that John here has typically made a free translation of both Dan. 7:13 and Zech. 12:10–14 (his renderings differ from both the MT and LXX) to fit the context. She believes that Matt. 24:30, John 19:37, and Rev. 1:7 stem from an early tradition on the epiphany of the Son of Man as an eschatological (but nonapocalyptic) event (546).

1:8. It is somewhat debated whether τὸ Ἄλφα καὶ τὸ Ὠ stems from Jewish or Hellenistic background. Many scholars (e.g., Mounce, Beasley-Murray, Thomas, Beale) argue that John also has in mind the first (*aleph*) and last (*tav*) letters of the Hebrew alphabet and is alluding to Isa. 41:4; 43:10; and 44:6 on the universal reign of God. Others (e.g., Aune 1987: 489–91; Krodel) believe it stems from Hellenistic magic, that is, the use of the seven Greek vowels as the name of the supreme God. In light of the prominence of Jewish OT background in this section, however, Jewish sources are more likely.

- I. Prologue (1:1–8)
- II. Churches Addressed (1:9–3:22)
- III. God in Majesty and Judgment (4:1–16:21)
- IV. Final Judgment at the Arrival of the Eschaton (17:1–20:15)
- V. New Heaven and New Earth (21:1–22:5)
- VI. Epilogue (22:6–21)

II. Churches Addressed (1:9–3:22)

The prologue related the purpose of the letter and introduced many of the major themes to be addressed in this book. This first major section of the Apocalypse centers on the churches that are addressed in the book. The opening portion, 1:9–20, contains the inaugural vision and relates both the provenance of the book (1:9–10a) and the commission to write (1:10b–11). It describes the churches themselves as “golden lampstands” among whom Christ as “one like the Son of Man” is standing (1:12–13a). Drawing on OT images of Yahweh, the vision portrays Christ as cosmic victor and judge (1:13b–16), and then as sovereign over history and the Risen One (1:17–18). Finally, John is given another commission to write (1:19) and the churches are addressed (1:20). The second section, 2:1–3:22, contains an epistle addressed to each church that summarizes the successes (“I know your works”) and failures (“but I have this against you”) of that church along with a solution for their difficulties and a promise for those who conquer those problems (“to him who overcomes”).

A. Inaugural Vision (1:9–20)

The first part of this important section presents John as not only a “slave” of God (1:1) but also a prophet and a seer. The description of the scene and the divine commission to write is reminiscent of the calls of Isa. 6, Jer. 1, and Ezek. 1–3. Also, the voice tells John to write what he “sees” (1:11) and not just what he hears, thus moving into the realm of apocalyptic visions. The vision of Christ walking among the golden lampstands (1:12–16) fills two purposes: defining the commissioner of the book in eschatological terms and introducing the christological themes that will dominate the letters themselves (2:1–3:22). It contains rich intertextual echoes, combining Dan. 7 and 10, with the description of Christ also adding elements from the priestly tradition of Exodus (the robe and girdle), the prophetic tradition of Ezekiel (the feet and the voice), and the historical tradition of Judges (the face). Finally, the vision of 1:12–16 is followed by a second (cf. 1:11) commission in 1:17–20, identifying the Son of Man in terms reminiscent of 1:4–8 (cf. 1:17–18) and telling John again to write down the visions (1:19), concluding with an important interpretation of the stars and the lampstands (1:20).

1. Setting and commission (1:9–11)
 - a. John’s situation (1:9)
 - b. Commission to write (1:10–11)
2. Vision of the exalted Christ (1:12–16)
 - a. Contents (1:12–13a)
 - b. Description of the glorified Christ (1:13b–16)
3. Commission expanded (1:17–20)
 - a. Person of Christ (1:17–18)
 - i. John’s reaction (1:17a)
 - ii. Jesus’ assurance and revelation (1:17b–18)
 - b. Commission to write expanded (1:19)
 - c. Interpretive key (1:20)

Exegesis and Exposition

⁹I, John, your brother and partner in the persecution and kingdom and endurance that is in Jesus, was on the island called Patmos on account of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus. ¹⁰I was in the Spirit on the Lord’s Day, and I heard a loud voice behind me like a trumpet, ¹¹saying, “Write what you see in a book and send it to the seven churches, to Ephesus and Smyrna and Pergamum and Thyatira and Sardis and Philadelphia and Laodicea.”

¹²And I turned in order to see the voice that was speaking to me. When I turned, I saw seven golden lampstands. ¹³In the middle of the lampstands there was one like a son of man, dressed with a robe flowing down to his feet and a golden sash across his chest. ¹⁴His head, namely his hair, was white like wool, as white as snow, and his eyes were like a raging fire. ¹⁵His feet were like polished bronze refined in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of roaring waters. ¹⁶He was holding seven stars in his right hand, and a sharp two-edged sword was coming out of his mouth. His face was like the sun shining in its strength.

¹⁷When I saw him, I fell at his feet as if I were dead. He laid his right hand on me and said, “Stop being afraid. I am the First and the Last, ¹⁸the Living One. I was dead, and behold, I am alive for eternity. I possess the keys of Death and Hades. ¹⁹Therefore, write what you have seen and what is and what must occur after these things. ²⁰As for the mystery of the seven stars that you saw in my right hand and the seven golden lampstands, the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches.”

1. Setting and Commission (1:9–11)

a. John’s Situation (1:9)

The opening (“I, John”) frames the book, occurring here and in 22:8 to indicate the author. As Swete (1911: 11) points out, this form is common among “apocalyptic prophets” (Dan. 7:28; 8:1; 1 Enoch 12.3; 2 Esdr. [4 Ezra] 2:33). John next identifies himself with his readers in their suffering by calling himself ὁ ἀδελφὸς ὑμῶν καὶ συγκαινωνός (*ho adelphos hymōn kai synkoinōnos*, your brother and partner). It was common in epistles to use the more official title “apostle” (as Paul does), but John has always avoided such, using no title in 1 John and “elder” in 2 and 3 John. Here he obviously wishes to demonstrate commonality and shared experience. Such language was frequently utilized by Jesus (e.g., Mark 10:29–30) and the early church (note the “household” imagery throughout the Pastorals) for the church as a family unit, as “brothers and sisters” of one another.

John expands this concept by adding that they are also “fellow sharers” or “partners,” building on the koinonia concept emphasized throughout NT literature (only James among NT writers fails to use it). Everywhere the word group appears it connotes the idea of community togetherness and mutual participation in the family of God and Christ. Such “fellowship” is first with God and then with one another. This is the only use of the term in Revelation, though the cognate verb occurs in 18:4, “Come out of her, my people, so that you will not *share* in her sins.” The idea here is a “shared” experience in suffering and glory.

The three areas “in” (ἐν, *en*) which they share^[1] are τῇ θλίψει καὶ βασιλείᾳ καὶ ὑπομονῇ (*tē thlipsei kai basileia kai hypomonē*, tribulation and kingdom and endurance). While some have tried to interpret them as separate and somewhat unrelated concepts, it is clear that grammatically (all three flowing out of ἐν τῇ) they are interrelated. Granville Sharp’s rule points out that in such situations the nouns often form a conceptual unity. Such is the case here. There is an ABA pattern in the three, as the suffering in “persecution” and “endurance” occurs as part of the believers’ share in God’s “kingdom.” The first term connotes “affliction” or “distress” in general and is the basic term used for the “tribulations” of the last days (Matt. 24:21, 29; Mark 13:19, 24). In the Apocalypse it occurs also in 2:22 of the “afflictions” to be visited upon the cult leader Jezebel and her followers, and in 2:9–10 and 7:14 of the “persecution” suffered by God’s people. Here it is certainly intended in the latter sense. As Schüssler Fiorenza states (1991: 50), “With it, John insists that he shares with Christians in Asia Minor the tribulations of the end time, which consist of possible exile, imprisonment, social ostracism, slander, poverty, economic exploitation, violence, and the constant threat of judicial action.” The proper response is “endurance,” the major Christian response in the book (Schüssler Fiorenza calls it “the main Christian virtue”) that always speaks of the “perseverance” of the saints in the face of oppression by the enemies of God, often accompanied by the idea of “faithful obedience” to God (cf. 2:2, 3, 19; 3:10; 13:10; 14:12). Hauck (TDNT 4:585) calls this the “basic attitude of the righteous” in the OT and later Judaism. It means both to wait upon God and to stand up against the temptations and evil of the world. Both ideas are central in the seven occurrences in the Apocalypse (1:9; 2:2, 3, 19; 3:10; 13:10; 14:12), calling for a

supreme steadfastness in light of both the soon return of Jesus and persecution by unbelievers. In other words, its vertical aspect is faithfulness to God, and its horizontal aspect is patient endurance of evil. As stated in the introduction, the perseverance of the saints is one of the primary themes of the book.

The central term of the three is βασιλεία (*basileia*, kingdom), the sphere within which their patient endurance is to function. In Jesus' teaching "kingdom" referred to the inbreaking rule of God that began with his first advent but would not be consummated until his second coming. Here this inaugurated aspect is certainly intended, as believers must "endure" evil in the present "kingdom" in light of their imminent vindication by God when the final "kingdom" comes. As Kraft (1974: 40) points out, Christian hope has its basis in the royal reign of Christ. The believer is already participating in the empire of God and Christ, although in the present that shared "rule" takes the form of spiritual conflict against the satanic kingdom and persecution by the world empire of this age. This is the key to βασιλεία in Revelation: in the present we are both "kingdom and priests" (1:6; 5:10) in the midst of the "kingdoms" of evil (17:12, 17, 18) as we await the appearance of the "King of kings" (19:16), who will visit wrath upon the "kingdom" of the beast (16:10) and replace "the kingdom of this world" with the eternal "kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ" (11:15; 12:10). As Paul says in Acts 14:22, it is "through many hardships" that we will "enter the kingdom of God" (cf. Mark 10:29–30; John 16:33; 1 Thess. 3:3; 2 Tim. 3:12; 1 Pet. 2:21).

All three (persecution, kingdom, endurance) are experienced ἐν Ἰησοῦ (*en Iēsou*, in Jesus). Beale (1999: 201) says that this threefold self-designation of John in Rev. 1:9 is modeled after the description of Jesus in 1:5. In other words, the identity and union of believers is possible only because of our corporate identity "in Jesus." The repetition of ἐν ("in . . . in") stresses the NT teaching that all Christian suffering was interpreted in the early church as a participation "in Christ" (cf. Rom. 8:17; 2 Cor. 1:5; 4:10; Phil. 3:10; Col. 1:24; 1 Pet. 4:13). In a very real sense, affliction in the name of Christ was perceived as sharing in his life and glory (1 Pet. 1:11, in which "the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow" become a model for Christian endurance in the rest of the epistle).

John's situation as he "shared" their "affliction" is next described. He was "on the island called Patmos." While some have argued that John isolated himself there as part of his visionary quest, others contend that John was banished there. L. Thompson (1990: 173) and Aune (1997: 78–79) argue that it was not a penal colony, however, for there is little record of anyone being banished there (but John was exiled there). Most likely John was temporarily banished there for proclaiming the gospel (see below). Ancient writers (e.g., Tacitus, Pliny) tell us that Patmos, a volcanic and rocky island, was one of three among the Sporades chain in the Aegean Sea. It was about ten miles long and six wide and was located thirty-seven miles southwest of Miletus, a harbor city near Ephesus. Therefore it is likely that Eusebius (*Eccl. Hist.* 3.18–20) was correct when he said John was banished there (according to him, in the fourteenth year [A.D. 95] of Domitian's reign). Life there was not too harsh, as indicated by its decent-size population and two gymnasia as well as a temple of Artemis. Thus John would have lived a fairly normal life as an exile on that island. He was likely there only a short time and was allowed to go to Ephesus in a general amnesty for exiles by the emperor Nerva in A.D. 96 after Domitian died (see Aune 1997: 77; Carroll, *ABD* 5:178–79).

The reasons for John's banishment are explained as διὰ τὸν λόγον τοῦ θεοῦ καὶ τὴν μαρτυρίαν Ἰησοῦ (*dia ton logon tou theou kai tēn martyrian Iēsou*, because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus). The concatenation of these two ideas ("word" and "testimony") occurs three other times, once positively (1:2) of the prophetic visions and twice negatively (6:9, 20:4) in a context of

persecution. The link with 1:2 is the reason some have argued John was on Patmos for prophetic inspiration. The context with Patmos here makes it more likely, however, that the two phrases speak of the reason John was exiled. Still, the meaning is similar to that of 1:2. The two phrases mean that John was banished because of his preaching “the word of God” and “witnessing for Jesus.”^[2] There were two kinds of exile, temporary and permanent; if Irenaeus (*Against Heresies* 2.22.5) was correct that John was later released and lived into the reign of Trajan, this was probably temporary banishment. It is also not known how widespread the persecution that led to John’s exile was; on the basis of this book, it may have been somewhat severe (see “Persecution of Christians” under “Date” in the introduction to this commentary). However, this is not the same as Paul’s imprisonment in Caesarea or Rome. John was not in house arrest or in a dungeon. He had the freedom of the island, which contained at least one small town on it. Banishment meant that one was restricted to a particular locale, but exiles could take as many possessions as they wished to their new home (see Aune 1997: 79–80).

b. Commission to Write (1:10–11)

Here we catch a glimpse of the prophetic/apocalyptic state, as John tells us he was^[3] ἐν πνεύματι (*en pneumati*, in the Spirit), when he received the first vision. This phrase occurs four times in the Apocalypse (1:10; 4:2; 17:3; 21:10), and some (e.g., D. Turner 1992: 281) have posited that this is a primary marker designating the four major divisions of the book. Few, however, would call this a major marker, though it is used as a literary device to point to the apocalyptic nature of the visions. Also, while this could refer to the human spirit (i.e., the “spiritual state” in which John received the vision), it almost certainly refers to the Holy Spirit as the source. The phrase appears often in the NT, sometimes of the inspiration of OT authors (e.g., Matt. 22:43) or of prophetic utterance (e.g., Luke 2:27; 1 Cor. 12:3) or of spiritual guidance (e.g., Acts 19:21). Jeske (1986: 455, 462–63) says it refers not to ecstatic experience but to “participation in the community of the Holy Spirit.” Since the work of the Holy Spirit in the book is linked to the community as a whole, that is also the thrust here.^[4] In the visionary experiences of Acts 11:5; 22:17; and possibly of 2 Cor. 12:2–4, however, this was an ecstatic experience in which the Holy Spirit took over the senses. But unlike Peter in Acts 10:10 and Paul in 16:9, John appears to be conscious as he receives this message and vision. The Spirit as the source of prophetic inspiration is quite common in the OT (e.g., Num. 24:2; 1 Kings 18:12; Joel 2:28; but especially in Ezek. 3:12, 14; 8:3; 11:1, 24; 37:1; 43:5, with his characteristic “The Spirit of the Lord lifted me up and brought me”). As with Ezekiel and in fulfillment of Joel’s end-time prophecy (2:28, “your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions”), John here is indicating a Spirit-sent visionary experience intended to tell his readers that God is indeed in process of bringing history to a close (see the excellent discussion in Bauckham 1993a: 150–59).

John was given this vision ἐν τῇ κυριακῇ ἡμέρᾳ (*en tē kyriakē hēmera*, on the Lord’s Day), a phrase found only here in the NT. Three options have been suggested for its meaning: (1) It may be a reference to the eschatological day of the Lord, so that John is transported to the time of the eschaton (so Bullinger 1909: 12; Walvoord 1966: 42); but neither the language here nor the contents of 1:12–20 make that likely, for the NT commonly uses the genitive κυρίου (*kyriou*, Lord’s) to designate the “day of the Lord,” while John here has the adjective. (2) It may refer to Easter Sunday as the day of the parousia within the confines of Easter liturgy (M. Shepherd 1960; Strand 1966–67); but this is highly speculative, and this view did not arise until at least a century later. (3) Most likely this phrase refers to Sunday, chosen by the early church on the basis of the resurrection as

the day of worship (Stott 1965–66; Bauckham 1982: 221–50). Stott (73–74) argues that κυριακῇ was originally associated with the resurrection and then with the eschatological triumph of the Lord of lords and thereby came to be used of the “Lord’s Day.” It is likely that the Jewish-Christian church worshiped in the synagogues on the Jewish Sabbath and in their own assemblies from the earliest times on Sunday, celebrating the Eucharist and worshiping Christ together (cf. Acts 2:42). While this is the first appearance of “the Lord’s Day” as a technical term for Sunday worship, it became a common term for such in the second century. John was worshiping on that day and received this vision.

The ecstatic experience is auditory before it is visionary. John hears **φωνὴν μεγάλην ὡς σάλπιγγος** (*phōnēn megalēn hōs salpingos*, a loud voice like a trumpet). The “loud voice” is common in Revelation for such auditory messages and more often than not is from an angel (e.g., 5:2, 12; 7:2; 10:3; 14:15, 18; 19:17), and so some have posited that this too is an angel. However, the repetition of the commission to write in 1:19 is clearly the voice of Christ, and elsewhere in the book the angel is directly mentioned. Therefore, it is more likely Christ here as well. The metaphor of the “trumpet” has great significance, for in almost every NT occurrence it has eschatological significance as a harbinger of the day of the Lord (Matt. 24:31; 1 Cor. 15:52; 1 Thess. 4:16) or a theophany (Heb. 12:19). Both overtones are intended here. Three aspects in its OT use may be significant for its eschatological use in Revelation: to signal warfare (Judg. 3:27; 6:34; Ezek. 7:14); as heralds for the king, especially in a coronation sense (2 Sam. 15:10; 1 Kings 1:34–35); and in cultic worship during festive processions (2 Sam. 6:15; Neh. 12:35–36) or sacrificial offerings (2 Chron. 29:27–28). All three are intended in the book; the first becomes prominent later, but here the second and third are more central. The voice of Christ is theophanic and prepares for the appearance and worship of the “one like a son of man” in 1:12–20.

The commission to “write” in 1:11 is the first of twelve such commands in the book. In addition to this occurrence in chapter 1, there are seven in the letters (chaps. 2 and 3) and four more in the rest of the book (1:19; 14:13; 19:9; 21:5), always with the aorist imperative **γράψον** (*grapson*, write). As it is the normal tense for such a command, it has its basic simple force, “write this down.” As Beale (1999: 203) notes, this carries connotations of Yahweh’s charge to OT prophets (Exod. 17:14; Isa. 30:8; Jer. 36:28; Tob. 12:20). The content of the message, **Ὅ βλέπεις** (*ho blepeis*, what you see), is placed before the imperative for emphasis. The repetition of the command to write in 1:19 and in chapters 2 and 3 could restrict this to the vision of 1:12–16. In that sense there would be an *inclusio* in the present tense “see” here and the aorist “what you have seen” in 1:19, framing this significant first vision with the command to “write it down.” However, verse 19 points beyond verses 12–16 to what is now (chaps. 2–3) and what will take place later (chaps. 4–22). Therefore, this command most likely introduces the visions of the whole book and is expanded in verse 19.

John then proceeds to enumerate the recipients of this apocalyptic epistle, the seven churches of the province of Asia. While these will be explained in more detail in the next two chapters, a few preliminary comments can be made. The order of the cities is significant, for they form the circular route of a letter carrier beginning at Ephesus and moving first north to Smyrna and to Pergamum, then turning southeast to Thyatira, south to Sardis, east to Philadelphia, and finally southeast to Laodicea. Also, we must ask why these particular cities are chosen. Troas and Colosse were critical NT centers, and Magnesia and Tralles were more important cities than Philadelphia or Thyatira. The best solution is still probably that of William Ramsay, as argued further by Hemer (1986: 14–15). These seven cities formed a natural center of communication for the rest of the province, since they were in order of sequence on an inner circular route through the territory. There is good

reason to suppose that since Pauline times they had become “organizational and distributive centers” from which messages would disseminate to the other churches of the province. DeSilva (1990: 193) also points out that these particular cities were chosen partly for their relationship to the imperial cult. All but Thyatira had temples dedicated to the emperors, and all but Philadelphia and Laodicea had imperial priests and altars. I would add one other point. They also represented the problems of the other churches in the area (note how each letter includes “Hear what the Spirit says to the churches”). As we will see, each town had its own particular set of problems but also served as examples for the other churches.

2. Vision of the Exalted Christ (1:12–16)

It is interesting to note that the vision itself apparently does not end at 1:16 but continues through the letters of chapters 2 and 3. It is only with the “after these things” of 4:1 that this inaugural vision is ended. This brings a strong literary unity to 1:12–3:22 and highlights the extent to which the christological vision of 1:12–20 prepares for the letters themselves. The vision itself has two sections: the glorified picture of his true reality in 1:12–16 and the expanded commission of verses 17–20. The details of verses 12–16 will be repeated in the commission of each letter and serve as an authoritative portrait of the glorified Christ. Beale (1999: 205–6) states that the description portrays Christ as “end-time ruler and judge.” In particular, his role as judge provides a warning to the churches that they must indeed remain faithful to their calling.

a. Contents (1:12–13a)

The key is the verbal unit, “turned and saw,” with its double accusative, “seven golden lampstands . . . and one like a son of man.” Since the commissioning voice was originally “behind” John (1:10), it was natural that he ἐπέστρεψα (*epestrepso*, turned around; the aorist tense depicts the simple action of the original vision). This verb is used frequently in the NT for the action of “turning around” to face a crowd (Mark 5:30) or a person (Acts 16:18). The action of “turning around” is given special emphasis, however, by the repetition of the verb in the second clause with the temporal participle ἐπιστρέψας (*epistrepso*, when I turned). It is possible that there is double meaning, with a metaphorical aspect added—John not only “turned around,” but this was a “turning point” for the church, namely, that moment when the visions of God’s plan to end world history were to begin.^[5] John’s intention was “to see” (infinitive of purpose βλέπειν, *blepein*) who was “speaking.”^[6] It is unusual to try to “see” a “voice,” a type of metonymy in which the “voice” is personified for the speaker, Christ.^[7] By stressing the voice, John emphasizes the commission in 1:11, which will be amplified in 1:17–20.

The first thing he sees, however, is not the “voice” itself but ἐπὶ τὰ λυχνίας χρυσᾶς (*hepta lychnias chrysas*, seven golden lampstands). The “lampstand” was not a candleholder but a stand on which lamps were set. The lamp was normally an oil lamp with a single hole through which the wick protruded. The OT imagery is varied. The basic passage is Exod. 25:31–40, in which Moses is commanded to make “a lampstand of pure gold” for the Holy Place with seven branches and lamps resting on the lampstand, the sacred menorah that became a symbol of Judaism. In 1 Kings 7:48–49 Solomon placed ten separate lampstands in the Holy Place, five on each side of the altar of incense, possibly to indicate completeness. Finally, Zech. 4:2, 10 is the OT passage most closely related here, especially as it was already alluded to in 1:4 (see above). In 4:2 Zechariah is given a vision of a seven-branched gold lampstand “with seven channels” (either channels for the oil to get to the lamps or

spouts in which the wicks are set), and in 4:10 the “seven” (probably the seven lamps) are defined as “the eyes of the LORD, which range throughout the earth.”

There have been many interpretations of the lampstand. While it could refer to Yahweh’s presence among his people, most take it as a reference to Israel shining upon the nations with the Holy Spirit (1:6) and the truth of God. There are two differences between Zechariah and Rev. 1:12: in the latter there are seven separate lampstands, and on the basis of 1:20 they refer to the seven churches in chapters 2–3. Nevertheless, the basic thrust is the same: the churches are depicted as shining lights for God in the midst of a hostile world. This witness theme fits the imagery already suggested for 1:6–7 above and will be extended further in the two witnesses of chapter 11, called “the two olive trees and the two lampstands that stand before the Lord of the earth” in 11:4, a further allusion to Zech. 4:2–3.

Christ, the key figure that will dominate the rest of the chapter, is now introduced (1:13). First, he is ἐν μέσῳ τῶν λυχνιῶν (*en mesō tōn lychniōn*, in the midst of the candlesticks). Swete (1911: 15) takes the preposition literally, with Jesus “in the middle of the row, either behind the fourth λυχνία, or moving freely from one to another (ii.1).” It is preferable, however, to take the image metaphorically, and Metzger (1993: 26) captures it better: “When John says he saw Christ in the midst of the lampstands, he wants to let us know that Christ is not an absentee landlord. On the contrary, he is in the midst of his churches supporting them during trials and persecutions.” This begins a progression of images, with Jesus “in the midst of” the lampstands (1:13), then “holding” the seven stars “in his right hand” (1:16; 2:1; 3:1), and finally “walking among the seven golden lampstands” (2:1). All three images depict Christ involved in the lives of his people and sovereignly protecting them. But as Giesen (1997: 87) states, there can also be a warning involved here. Since Christ is lord over the church, he can remove them if they do not turn themselves around (e.g., 2:5).

Rowland (1980: 1–2) says that the titles of Christ in 1:13–14 are drawn from the angelology of Dan. 10:5–6 under the influence of Dan. 7:9. The one who is with his people is now described in terms drawn from Dan. 7:13, ὅμοιον υἱὸν ἀνθρώπου (*homoion huion anthrōpou*, one like a son of man). The accusative case tells us that this is the second direct object of εἶδον (*eidon*), “I saw seven golden lampstands . . . and one like a son of man.”^[8] There is an obvious connection with the “Son of Man” sayings in the Gospels, though the different form (in the Gospels it is articular while here it is anarthrous) shows this is a direct allusion to Daniel rather than to the logia Jesu. Nevertheless there is still a connection with the exalted Danielic image in many Gospel sayings, where the Danielic nuance of the glorified messianic figure is apparent (see the additional notes below).

The meaning of the Dan. 7:13–14 image of “one like a son of man” is also highly debated. Most generally agree that כְּבָר אֲדָם (*kěbar ʾnāš*, like a son of man) means “humanlike,” but the significance of this leads to several possible interpretations: the righteous remnant within Israel (cf. Ps. 144:3–4; 146:3); Daniel himself (like Ezekiel, Daniel is called בֶּן אָדָם, *ben ʾādām*, son of man, in 8:17); a human leader of Israel, perhaps Moses redivivus (see Deut. 32:1–4) or a Maccabean deliverer (on the basis of Ps. 145 and 149; cf. 1 Macc. 2:42); a heavenly figure as the Davidic anointed king (on the basis of the transcendence and coming on the clouds of heaven); Israel as a whole (coming from God as the holy ones on high, afflicted and vindicated; cf. Ps. 80); a celestial being, probably an archangel figure like the being dressed in linen of Dan. 10:5–12:13 or like Gabriel (see Dan. 8:15–27; 9:20–27) or Michael (see Dan. 10:13, 21; 12:1); or a messianic deliverer that both represents Israel in heaven and comes down from heaven (see the excellent survey in Goldingay

1989: 167–72). In choosing among these alternatives, several criteria stand out from the immediate context of Dan. 7. The “one like a son of man” (see Salter 1993: 349–50 on this translation) is the antithesis of the four beasts of 7:3–7 (“like a lion . . . a bear . . . a leopard . . . a terrifying beast with ten horns”); he is closely connected with the Ancient of Days in 7:9–10 and is presented to him in heaven in 7:13; he is given dominion and establishes a final kingdom in 7:14; he is connected to the saints in their suffering and vindication in 7:17–22 and 7:23–28.

With all of this it seems to me that a messianic deliverer is the most likely. The figure is not human but is “like a man,” and he will reign over the people of God in the same way that the beasts rule the earth. While an identification with a messianic deliverer is highly debated, that is indeed the interpretation in 1 Enoch 37–71 (the Similitudes of Enoch) and 2 Esdr. (4 Ezra) 13. While the Similitudes of Enoch have often been seen as post-Christian and possibly Christian works, it is now common to regard them as pre-Christian, and they with 2 Esdras/4 Ezra (a Jewish apocalypse of the same period as Revelation, written at the end of the first century) show that this was indeed a common Jewish interpretation of Dan. 7. Rowland (1980: 2) sees further influence from 1 Enoch 46.3, and thus there is “a bestowal of the office of vice-regent on one heavenly being by another.” Therefore, the “son of man” image in Daniel, the Gospels, and Revelation was a messianic figure with divine overtones. Aune (1997: 90–92) adds that Rev. 1:13 may be part of a tradition “referring to the [Danielic] Son of Man as identical with the Ancient of Days” (see additional note). Thus this provides a further emphasis on the unity between God and Christ in the Apocalypse.

b. Description of the Glorified Christ (1:13b–16)

Eight successive images are drawn from the OT and intended to introduce themes that will carry through the rest of the Book of Revelation. As Sweet (1979: 70) brings out, this dynamic picture is not meant as a literal description but rather a metaphorical image. We are not meant to put all this together as a picture of Jesus: white hair, blazing eyes, bronzed feet, thunderous voice, a sword coming out of his mouth. The accumulated images portray not his visage but his power and glory. We must heed the warning of Caird (1966: 25–26) not to overdo the background and sources, so as to “unweave the rainbow. John uses his allusions not as a code in which each symbol requires separate and exact translation, but rather for their evocative and emotive power. This is not photographic art. His aim is to set the echoes of memory and association ringing.” Nevertheless, these “associations” were obvious to his readers, who had grown up within the milieu of such images. We have not, so the evocative pictures still need to be unpacked for us, and we must keep our eyes on the whole and not just the parts. Verses 14–16 are grammatically linked and build on 1:13b. Verse 14 begins with **δέ** (*de*, now), followed by a series of **καί** (*kai*, and) clauses that provide further descriptions of the “one like a son of man.” Yet the whole of verses 14–16 elaborate the first description of verse 13b. The **δέ** probably functions to provide a further list to deepen the opening metaphor of verse 13b. Moyise (1995: 37) brings out that while several OT texts have been woven together, Dan. 10:5–6 stands out, as the description follows a similar order: first the clothing, moving from the linen to a belt of gold, then the hair (Daniel—body) followed by the flaming eyes, the legs like bronze, and the powerful voice.

1. *Long Robe and Golden Sash*. There are two options for the background and meaning of the robe/sash, and scholars are divided. The majority believe they refer to the robe and sash of the high priest, since six of the seven times the long robe is mentioned in the OT (e.g., Exod. 28:4; 39:29) it refers to the high priestly vestments (so Swete, Bruce, Lohmeyer, Krodel, Schüssler Fiorenza, Boring, Chilton, Mounce, Giesen, Beale). However, many other scholars (e.g., Lenski, Beasley-

Murray, Morris, Thomas, Metzger, Roloff, Aune) believe it is more general, since long robes and sashes across the chest were also worn by dignitaries and rulers. The latter is more likely here. The phrase ἐνδεδυμένον ποδήρη (*endedymenon podērē*, clothed down to his feet) occurs in Ezek. 9:2, in a passage depicting divine judgment on the ungodly, without priestly imagery. The “golden sash around his chest” could be the sacred ephod of the high priest embroidered with gold thread (Exod. 28:4; 29:5; cf. 39:29), but it is more likely from Dan. 10:5, where Daniel had a vision of a man “dressed in linen, with a belt of finest gold.” Moreover, in Rev. 15:6 the seven angels wear “golden sashes around their chests,” and there is no priestly thrust there either. In short, the first description depicts Christ as an exalted, dignified figure. The day laborer wore the sash around the waist, in order to tuck in a tunic for work. The aristocrat wore it around the chest, as here, to indicate high rank.

2. *White Head and Hair*. Another characteristic of the Apocalypse is seen here in 1:14, the tendency to utilize OT descriptions of God for Jesus, thereby stressing further the unity between the Father and the Son. In Dan. 7:9 it is said of the Ancient of Days: “His clothing was as white as snow; the hair of his head was white like wool.” In ancient culture white hair indicated both dignity and the accumulated wisdom of years of experience. Moreover, white wool points to one of the major industries of the region, the wool industry of Laodicea (cf. Rev. 3:18). The wool and the snow together picture pure, dazzling whiteness. There was no other way in the ancient world to portray perfect whiteness (cf. Mark 9:3 of the transfiguration, “His clothes became dazzling white, whiter than anyone in the world could bleach them”). Christ in this simile is pictured in his eternal wisdom and in the respect due his person (cf. Lev. 19:32; Prov. 20:29).^[9]

3. *Blazing Eyes*. This image stems from Dan. 10:6 (“his eyes like flaming torches”) and will be repeated in Rev. 2:18 (the letter to Thyatira) and 19:12 (the parousia of the King of kings). Most scholars note the extent to which this pictures the divine insight that penetrates to the core of the human situation. As in Daniel, however, this goes beyond that to include also the fierce judgment of the God who knows and acts against those who disobey him. That is the context of 2:18 (the Thyatira church that failed to deal with the cult movement led by “Jezebel”) and 19:12 (the return of Christ in judgment—“with justice he judges and makes war,” 19:11).

4. *Bronze Feet*. This image in 1:15 is closely related to Christ’s blazing eyes in both Dan. 10:6 (“his arms and legs like the gleam of burnished bronze”) and Rev. 2:18 (“whose feet are like burnished bronze”); note also Ezek. 1:7 (cherubim whose feet “gleamed like burnished bronze”). The Greek, however, is very difficult to interpret. The description of the feet, ὅμοιοι χαλκολιβάνῳ (*homoioi chalkolibanō*, like bronze), is problematic because the noun occurs only in Rev. 1:15 and 2:18 in all of extant ancient Greek literature. As Hemer (1986: 111) points out, even ancient writers were uncertain of its true meaning. He suggests four aspects of the term: the OT passages (esp. Dan. 10:6) point to a shining metal; it had to be understandable to the original readers, thus it possibly points to the bronze guild of Thyatira (cf. Rev. 2:18); the relationship of Rev. 1:15 and 2:18 to Dan. 10:6 had relevance for the local situation; philologically, the term must be understood as a metal alloy of copper, bronze, or brass. From this Hemer (1986: 112–17) after an extensive discussion concludes that this was a brass alloy of copper and zinc, used for military purposes (Thyatira was a Roman garrison town or military headquarters) and in coinage. This is as close as we can get to the meaning of the term.

This image of “polished bronze” emphasizes the glory and strength of Christ. It is further clarified by ὡς ἐν καμίνῳ πεπυρωμένης (*hōs en kaminō pepyrōmenēs*, refined by fire as in a furnace). This is another difficult phrase (see additional notes for the text-critical problem). The picture is

probably that of a kiln in which the metal was brought to white-hot heat in order to refine or purify it. Thus the imagery of “gleaming” or “burnished” metal pictures the molten state, with the metal glowing in all its purity (so R. Charles, Swete, Beckwith, Thomas). Since feet in the ancient world portrayed the direction of one’s life, the image here depicts Christ’s life in both its strength or stability and its absolute purity. With the influence of Rev. 2:18, which utilizes this image in the context of judgment upon the cult followers of Jezebel, it is also possible that this strength and purity are part of divine justice on the ungodly and apostate. This would fit the military imagery behind this symbol. It signifies not only glory and strength but warns of potential judgment.

5. *Powerful Voice*. Again John draws on OT descriptions of Yahweh to show Christ in his divine glory and power. This detail stems from Ezek. 1:24 (the living creatures’ wings “like the roar of rushing waters, like the voice of the Almighty”) and 43:2 (Yahweh’s voice “like the roar of rushing waters”). This concept is used again in Rev. 14:2 (the voice from heaven) and 19:6 (the voice of the great multitude raised in praise). The Greek ὡς ἰωνὴ ὑδάτων πολλῶν (*hōs phōnē hydatōn pollōn*, like the sound of roaring waters) actually connotes “many waters” or “great waters” and could picture a great waterfall or a white-water cascade or “the endless pounding of the shores of Patmos by waves of the Aegean Sea” (Thomas 1992: 102). In the Mediterranean region the roar of oceanic waters is the more likely. In any case, the image is that of power and strength, the awesome voice of God. Christ’s speaking has already been described as “a loud voice like a trumpet,” and this obviously builds on that image.

6. *Stars in His Right Hand*. The right hand throughout Scripture symbolizes power and authority (cf. Ps. 110:1; Matt. 26:64; et al.). To “hold” (ἔχων, *echōn*) something means in one sense to “acquire” or “take possession” of the thing and in another sense to “keep” or “preserve” the thing. Probably both ideas (possessing and protecting) are intended here. To “have . . . in his hand” occurs often in this book (1:16; 2:1; 3:1 with ἔχων only; 6:5; 10:2; 17:4), and in each case the idea of power over the thing held is present. Therefore the glorified Christ is in complete control. The “seven stars” are identified in verse 20 as the angels of the seven churches addressed in chapters 2 and 3. There have been many suggestions as to the reason “stars” were used here (14 of the 24 NT uses are in this book). Basically, stars in the OT can be linked with angels (Job 38:7; cf. Rev. 9:1), though Israel is at all times forbidden to worship the “stars” (Deut. 4:19), an obvious reference to astrology. Some scholars see an astrological reference here, perhaps to the Pleiades cluster (linked in the Hellenistic world with the seven daughters of Atlas and Pleione), or as in Jewish writings with seven members of this solar system (sun, moon, Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn) linked with the seven branches of the menorah. In this sense an interesting suggestion is made by Krodel (1989: 95) that this could be intended to contrast with “the pretensions of Roman emperors who asserted their cosmic rule with the symbols of planets surrounding them.” In the ancient world stars were frequently seen as powers (usually the gods) that could influence the course of history and determine the destiny of humankind. See further on 1:20.

7. *Sword from His Mouth*. The ῥομφαία δίστομος ὀξεῖα (*rhomphaia distomos oxeia*, sharp two-edged sword) shows that the primary image in holding the seven stars above is not so much protection but control, here with the added idea of judgment. The image is drawn from Isa. 11:4 (cf. Isa. 49:2), which says that the Messiah (the “root of Jesse,” the “Branch” of 11:1 on whom the “Spirit of Yahweh” will “rest” in 11:2) will “strike the earth with the rod of his mouth; with the breath of his lips he will slay the wicked.” Fekkes (1994: 119–21; also Moyise 1995: 31) says that the replacement of “rod” with “sword” may have been influenced by Isa. 49:2 (“he made my mouth like a sharpened sword”) but is due primarily to John’s desire to “represent Christ as the bearer of universal judicial

authority.” In the OT and in Revelation this is connected with the “iron scepter” with which God/the Messiah will rule the nations (Ps. 2:9; Rev. 19:15). The sword (ῥομφαία) itself occurs often in this book (1:16; 2:12, 16; 6:8; 19:15, 21) but only in Luke 2:35 elsewhere. It was a large, broad Thracian sword used often in cavalry charges like a scythe, quite different from the Roman “short sword” (μάχαιρα, *machaira*) of Eph. 6:17 or Heb. 4:12.^[10] Here it is certainly a sword of judgment, and the “mouth” of the Messiah from which the sword comes forth portrays the proclamation of judgment, with the act of judgment (the sword) immediately following. In 2 Thess. 2:8 Christ at the parousia will destroy the “man of lawlessness” “with the breath of his mouth.” The “mouth” was an apocalyptic symbol for judgment (see also Rev. 9:17–19; 11:5; 12:15–16; 16:13; 19:15, 21) and here pictures the word of Christ (in 19:13 “his name is the Word of God”) raised in final judgment. In contrast to the cults of chapters 2 and 3 and the imperial cult in particular, Christ’s “mouth” speaks only truth (the “Word”) and judgment (against the enemies of truth), as in 2:12–16, where “the sword of his mouth” will make war against the Nicolaitan cult at Pergamum.

8. *Radiant Face*. This final picture sums up the others. It recalls Moses when he came down from Sinai and “his face was radiant, because he had spoken with Yahweh.” Also, John had been present at Jesus’ transfiguration when “his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light” (Matt. 17:2). God is called “a sun and shield” in Ps. 84:11, and in Isa. 60:19 we are told, “The LORD will be your everlasting light.” Once more an OT image of Yahweh is applied to the glorified Christ. Interestingly in this context, the OT symbol also contains a theme of judgment (a role common in the “sun gods” of ancient Mesopotamia), as in Jer. 43:13, “In the temple of the sun he will demolish the sacred pillars,” or in the apocalyptic use of “sun” imagery both in the OT (Isa. 13:10; Ezek. 32:7; Joel 2:10; Mic. 3:6) and in Revelation (6:12; 8:12; 9:2; 16:8; 19:17). In light of the “sword” imagery in the previous description, the twin themes of glory and judgment may well be connoted here. The glory theme is predominant, with the judgment motif secondary (in association with the previous image).

3. Commission Expanded (1:17–20)

John’s reaction stresses even more the divine presence, and Christ’s response has a double purpose here: concluding the picture of the exalted Christ by showing his unity with God the Father, and developing the commission to write from 1:11 by adding a further description of Christ, the eternal one (1:17–18), an eschatological perspective for the book as a whole (1:19), and an interpretive key for the preceding vision (1:20).

a. Person of Christ (1:17–18)

i. John’s Reaction (1:17a)

As in theophanies throughout the Bible, John ἔπεσα πρὸς τοὺς πόδας αὐτοῦ ὡς νεκρός (*epesa pros tous podas autou hōs nekros*, fell at his feet as dead). “Falling down” before visions of the Deity or his angelic messengers was a common reaction (e.g., Josh. 5:14; Ezek. 1:28; Dan. 8:17–18; 10:7–9; 1 Enoch 14.14; Matt. 17:6; John 18:6), and Moses was told, “You cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live” (Exod. 33:20). John’s reaction heightens the sense of apocalyptic power, for God/Christ is indeed present in all his glory. While some have labeled this nothing more than a “stereotype” (Moffatt 1983: 345), it is better to conclude with Krodel (1989: 96), “This feature is part of John’s credibility.” The natural reaction in the face of an epiphany is to fall to the ground in fear,

and John does so several times in the Apocalypse (1:17; 19:10; 22:8), though the other two are before angelic mediators. It is even more common to “fall down” in worship (4:10; 5:8, 14; 7:11; 11:16; 19:4), and this could also be connoted here, though the “fear” aspect is certainly uppermost.

ii. Jesus’ Assurance and Revelation (1:17b–18)

This is certainly the voice of Christ, the “one like a son of man” in 1:13. When Jesus touched John, there was both comfort and reassurance being given (so R. Charles, Swete, Ladd, Thomas). The language goes beyond this, however, for ἔθηκεν τὴν δεξιὰν αὐτοῦ ἐπ’ ἐμέ (*ethekēn tēn dexian autou ep’ eme*, placed his right hand on me) is semitechnical language for investiture as well as comfort (Aune 1997: 100). First, he places his “right hand,” the one that “holds the seven stars” in 1:16, on John. It is likely that the image of power and control is intended in this passage. Second, throughout the Bible “laying on the hand” is a commissioning act invoking as well as passing on authority and power (cf. Acts 6:6; 8:17–19; 13:3; 1 Tim. 4:14; 5:22; 2 Tim. 1:6; Heb. 6:2). It is hard to say how much of that imagery is intended here, but the use of the “right hand” would favor seeing some of this thrust in this passage. Roloff (1993: 37) sees this more as a “sign of blessing,” and while that may be part of the meaning, the commissioning with authority to write is better due to the language chosen and the context.

Christ begins by commanding, μὴ φοβοῦ (*mē phobou*), a present tense prohibition meaning “stop being afraid.”^[11] There is no need to fear the presence of God when one is serving him (contra the earth-dwellers of 6:16). This is a common response in the face of the fear caused by theophany (Dan. 10:10–18 [probably the primary passage alluded to here]; Matt. 14:27; Mark 16:6; Luke 1:13, 30). The basis of the reassurance, however, is who Jesus is. First, the description of God from 1:8 is here applied to Christ. Also, as we will see, many of the titles are utilized throughout Scripture as titles of God. Therefore, a major purpose is to establish the deity of Christ.

Jesus is first described as ἐγώ εἰμι (*egō eimi*, I am). It is difficult to know whether we should read the titular use of the “I am” from John into Revelation. Since there are some nuances of Exod. 3:14 in Rev. 1:4, however, it is indeed viable to see those aspects here, though it is possibly not as explicit as the predicated “I am” sayings of John 6:35; 8:12; 10:7, 11; 11:25; 14:6; 15:1. Three of the four ἐγώ εἰμι sayings of Revelation have clear parallels to John (1:8, “I am the Alpha and the Omega”; 1:17, “I am the First and the Last”; 22:16, “I am the Root of the Offspring of David”), while the fourth is possible (2:23, “I am he who searches hearts and minds”). There are no absolute (nonpredicated) sayings in Revelation, so the emphasis is not as strong as in the Gospel of John. Nevertheless, it is probably present (see Thomas 1992: 110 for a strong defense of the titular force here).

Jesus is then portrayed as ὁ πρῶτος καὶ ὁ ἔσχατος (*ho prōtos kai ho eschatos*, “the first and the last”). As Bauckham (1993b: 34) points out, this is connected to the “Alpha and Omega” title and is part of a pattern in which two references are found in the opening (1:8, 17) and closing (21:6; 22:13) of the book, with the two titles combined in 22:13 along with the added “the beginning and the end.” The “First and the Last” title derives from Isa. 41:4; 44:6; 48:12, where it refers to God as creator of all and sovereign over history. Bauckham (1993a: 27) also says, “God precedes all things, as their Creator, and he will bring all things to eschatological fulfillment. He is the origin and goal of all history. He has the first word, in creation, and the last word, in new creation” (also Kraft 1974: 48). In the context of Rev. 1:17–18, this sovereignty is now extended to Christ.

The addition of καὶ ὁ ζῶν (*kai ho zōn*, and the Living One) to “the First and the Last” here in 1:18 tells us that the primary thrust of the previous title is not so much sovereignty as eternity (see

also 2:8). This title itself is a common designation of God in the Bible (cf. Josh. 3:10; Ps. 42:2; Hos. 1:10; Acts 14:15; Rom. 9:26), and in Rev. 4:9, 10, and 10:6 he is “the one who lives forever and ever” (see also 2:8; 22:2, 14, 19 on the “tree of life”—God/Christ bestows life on his people). In the OT the title is in antithesis to the idols/pagan gods that have no life or power. In Revelation it is in contrast to the evil powers that control only “Death and Hades” (but see below on “the keys of Death and Hades” for the one in actual control). It is God and Christ alone who are eternal and make it possible to dwell in eternal bliss.

This eternality is exemplified particularly in the death and resurrection of Jesus, for as Paul argued in 1 Cor. 15:14, “If Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith.” The contrast between νεκρός (*nekros*, dead) and ζῶν (*zōn*, alive)^[12] is intended to highlight not just the death-resurrection but even more to emphasize the reality of his eternality (note it is present tense ζῶν εἰμι [*zōn eimi*, I am alive], not a reference to the past resurrection). He was “dead,” but now he is alive “forever and ever,” the strongest possible reference to eternity and the form used throughout this book (cf. 1:6, 18; 4:9, 10; 5:13; 7:12; 10:6; 11:15; 14:11; 15:7; 19:3; 20:10; 22:5, with the underlined verses focusing on the eternality of God/Christ).

The final description of Christ refers to his power over the cosmic forces. This was hinted at in the previous clause, “was dead and am alive,” since “Death” is one of the powers referred to here. Both in Hellenistic thought and in the Bible (linked with “Sheol”) “Hades” is the realm of the dead, often the grave. There is a difference of opinion as to the thrust of τοῦ θανάτου καὶ τοῦ ᾗδου (*tou thanatou kai tou hadou*, Death and Hades) here. Aune (1997: 103) points out that this is connected to the genitive “keys of Death and Hades”: if it is possessive (“belonging to Death and Hades”) they are personified beings; if it is objective (“keys to Death and Hades”), they are spatial. Some (e.g., Krodel 1989: 97; Mounce 1998: 61) believe this should not be personified to mean demonic forces but rather refers to the region of the underworld. Others (e.g., Roloff, Beasley-Murray, Sweet) believe that this is personified in Revelation and is not a place but an evil power. The two are always combined (1:18; 6:8; 20:13, 14) and seem to be personified everywhere. However, this would not obviate a secondary reference to the place of the dead. This could well be another case of both-and (so also Beale 1999: 214–15), especially since, as Aune (1997: 103) says, Death is never seen in ancient texts as possessing keys.^[13]

The emphasis on τὰς κλεῖς (*tas kleis*, the keys) follows Jewish and Hellenistic thought. “The keys” gain access to the “gates of death” (Job 17:16; Ps. 9:13; Isa. 38:10), although this exact connotation (the keys to Sheol) is not in the OT but develops in later Judaism near the time of the NT (Eccles. Rab. 3.21; *b. Hag.* 12b; 2 Enoch 42; *Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer* 34; *b. Ta An.* 2a). In the Hellenistic world the keys to Hades belong to Pluto, Persephone, or Hecate. Aune (1987: 484–89) argues that here Jesus replaces Hecate (goddess of magic and sorcery) as the one in control of the underworld. In light of the emphasis in the book on the imperial court, this is possible, but it is not the primary reference. Mainly, Christ through his death and resurrection has defeated the powers of evil (the twin forces of “Death and Hades”) and gained control over them (cf. Col. 2:15; 1 Pet. 3:19–20). In the NT, “key” in an eschatological text always has the idea of power or authority over a thing (cf. Matt. 16:19; Rev. 1:18; 3:7; 9:1; 20:1). Thus here he has overcome and gained mastery over the cosmic forces.

b. Commission to Write Expanded (1:19)

The basic commission was given in 1:11, commanding John to write down the visions and indicating the recipients of that inscription. Here the commission relates the contents of the visions. The οὖν (*oun*, therefore) draws a conclusion from the preceding statement. In light of

Jesus' cosmic victory over death and the forces of evil, John must "write" (γράφον, *grapson*, repeats the command of 1:11) down what God is telling him.

The contents of the verse are a well-known *crux interpretum*. The majority of commentators (Swete, R. Charles, Lohmeyer, Ladd, Walvoord, Kraft, Chilton, Krodel, Thomas) have understood ὃ εἶδες (*ha eides*, what you have seen) as the vision of chapter 1, ὃ εἰσιν (*ha eisin*, the things that are) as the letters to the seven churches in chapters 2 and 3, and ὃ μέλλει γενέσθαι μετὰ ταῦτα (*ha mellei genesthai meta tauta*, the things that must occur after these) as the visions of chapters 4–22. Others (Caird, Beckwith, Beasley-Murray, Mounce, Johnson, Wall) see a twofold thrust, with "what you have seen" a repetition of the commission in 1:11 and with the present and future relating to the rest of the book. Still others (van Unnik, Sweet, Roloff, Giesen) consider the three to be a common apocalyptic formula similar to the divine title of 1:4, perhaps taken from the Hellenistic world, "what was, is, and will be." [14] Michaels (1991: 606–8) calls 1:19 the voice of the omniscient or "knowledgeable narrator" as he relates and interprets what he sees. Similarly, C. Smith (1990b: 461–62) says it is not so much the outline of the book as an emphasis on the divine inspiration of the work. Thus all three (past, present, future) are intertwined throughout the book. Beale (1992: 360–87; 1999: 152–70) believes that 1:19 is an allusion to Dan. 2:28–29, 45, and the interpretation of Daniel's dream as a future-related vision. Thus all three clauses relate to the past, present, and future orientation of the entire book. This last suggestion has the greatest promise. The first option is weak because the seven letters are not just dealing with the present situation, for eschatological warnings and promises are featured throughout. Moreover, the visions of chapters 4–19 also have past, present, and future aspects intertwined throughout. The second is closer, but there is too little evidence that "what we have seen" simply points back to 1:11. It has more force than that. The third weakens all three and also has too little evidence. Therefore, the three clauses do parallel the title for God in verse 4 and relate to the eschatological perspective of the book as a whole.

c. Interpretive Key (1:20)

At key points in this book (cf. 7:13–14; 14:4–5; 17:7–18; 19:8b; 21:9–14; 22:6) angels and others mediate the visions and provide critical interpretive keys to the meaning of the symbols. Here two parts of the vision are chosen for interpretation—the lampstands and the stars. From these the meaning of the whole can be derived. It is clear that the focus is not only on who Christ is but also on the churches themselves as the recipients of τὸ μυστήριον (*to mystērion*, the mystery). The concept of "mystery" is a critical apocalyptic concept (cf. 1 Enoch 51.3; 103.2; 2 Esdr. [4 Ezra] 14:5; 1QS 3.21–23; 1QH 15 [7].27) not only for this book but for the early church as a whole (cf. Matt. 13:11; Rom. 11:25; 1 Cor. 2:7; Eph. 3:3–9; Col. 1:26–27). It refers to hidden secrets kept from the people of the past but now disclosed by God. In the Book of Revelation the full meaning can be seen (10:7; 17:5, 7), but in 1:20 it refers in less grandiose fashion to the meaning of these two key symbols from the first vision. Yet it still means more than just "symbol" (contra Sweet 1979: 73), for the vision as a whole is an apocalyptic "mystery" on Christ and the church.

The first symbol explained leads into the seven letters of chapters 2 and 3, each of which is addressed to "the angel of the church in. . . ." The meaning of the "angel" is highly disputed. The five options separate themselves into two sets centering on angels and human church representatives, respectively.

1. Some scholars (Alford, Beasley-Murray, Johnson, Schüssler Fiorenza, Beale) identify them as literal angels, building on the biblical teaching of guardian angels (Ps. 34:7; 91:11; Dan. 10:13–21;

Matt. 18:10; Acts 12:15; Heb. 1:14) and stars as representing angels (Job 38:7; Isa. 14:12–13). Thus these would be “patron angels” (Schüssler Fiorenza) of the churches. The primary objection to this is that the letters of the next two chapters address the problems of the churches and demand repentance from many—strange if the addressees were literal angels.

2. Others (Swete, Beckwith, Ladd, Prigent, Mounce) believe the “angels” are personified spirits of the churches or “heavenly counterparts” (Lohmeyer, Beasley-Murray, Harrington, Giesen) of the churches. In other words, they are used to typify the spiritual character of the churches and to address the spiritual needs of them as a whole. As we have already seen, personification is frequently utilized in the book (e.g., Death and Hades). However, this seems overly subtle. Furthermore, the other symbol, the lampstands, points to actual churches, so it is perhaps more likely that this points to actual beings.

3. Still others (Roloff, Krodel) believe the angels here reflect the tendency in Judaism and some parts of Christianity to worship angels. As Roloff (1993: 39–40) argues, the placement of these in the hands of Christ would remind the readers that they are not to worship angels but the one who controls the angels, Jesus Christ. The problem here is that this fits verse 20 but not the address in each of the letters to angels. The function of angels transcends the problem of worshiping angels.

4. Some (Zahn, Brownlee, Lenski, Walvoord, Hendriksen) believe that these are “messengers” (one meaning of ἄγγελος, *angelos*) or leaders of the churches, perhaps bishops or pastors (for this use see Matt. 11:10; Luke 7:24; 9:52; James 2:25). This would fit the use of “stars” throughout the ancient world (Jewish and Hellenistic) to designate dominion or sovereignty. The letters seem to address the churches as a whole rather than individuals, however, and “angel” throughout the Apocalypse (over sixty times) always refers to heavenly beings.

5. A few (e.g., Thomas 1992: 117–18) believe these are “messengers” in general, not leaders, perhaps some sent to Patmos to minister to John or the bearers of these letters to the individual churches. Thomas mentions Epaphroditus and Epaphras (Phil. 2:25; 4:18; Col. 4:12) as examples of this type in the NT. The problem with this is related to the problems of the fourth view. It is possible but does not fit either the tone of the letters or the use of ἄγγελος in the book.

The solution is not simple. To begin with, the use of “angel” in this book makes it extremely unlikely that these are human “messengers” of any type. However, it is difficult to choose among the other three. The third is indeed possible for this verse, but there is too little evidence of an angel cult in the seven churches. Therefore, a combination of the first two is the most likely. “Stars” were a symbol both of dominion and of angels. In the Hellenistic world the stars were gods, and in the Jewish world they represented angelic forces. Thus these stars were the angels in charge of each church but were also corporately identified with the churches. In one sense they were asked to intervene in the spiritual needs of the churches; in another sense they represented the churches.

The second symbol was already discussed in 1:12. The “lampstand” here is built on the Jewish menorah or seven-branched lampstand and refers to the “seven golden lampstands” of 1:12, identified here as the seven churches of 1:11. The connection between the angels and the churches will be evident in the next two chapters, and the critical point here is that Christ is in charge of both. In 1:12 Christ is “in the midst of” the lampstands, and in 1:16 he “holds” the stars “in his right hand,” with the latter mentioned again here for emphasis, “the seven stars that you saw in my right hand.” In both cases the point is that Christ is in control, sovereign over the angels and the churches they represent and serve. In the midst of their precarious situation in an evil world that both despises and persecutes them, Christ is with them, protecting and vindicating them. At the

same time he holds them accountable to persevere and remain faithful throughout their ordeal, as we will learn in each of the letters.

Summary and Contextualization

In 1:9–20 John introduces the reader to the purpose and content of his book as a whole. Two primary themes run throughout this passage—the glorified Christ and the church that is under his control and care. Christ is depicted as the fulfillment of OT imagery and apocalyptic hopes. The descriptions are not meant literally but as a symbolic portrayal of the one who is at the same time both Messiah and divine. In short, he is the divine ruler and judge over both the world and the church. The church is under his control, in both a positive (vindication and reward) and a negative (warning and accountability) direction. Also, the book of visions is introduced, and the churches to whom it is addressed are named. Throughout it all, the God who is in control of history (from 1:1–8) is still sovereign, but now his dominion is passed on to the glorified and risen Lord Jesus Christ.

The first section, 1:9–11, establishes the setting and lets us know that the author shares in all that the churches are experiencing: the suffering (his exile on Patmos) and royal status (he is chosen as the recipient of the vision) that demands perseverance in this life. At the same time, he above all serves and worships God, and the setting on the Lord’s Day is a perfect occasion for this first vision. We the readers are made aware of a major theme that will dominate many portions of this book—worship that demands witness and patient endurance in the difficulties of life. The commission to write flows out of this perspective and begins the apocalyptic imagery (the voice like a trumpet). We know that the message to follow will indeed be significant.

This book contains a great deal on the problem of suffering and persecution. Yet most of us have not experienced much persecution. However, several points are clear on this topic. First, millions around the world are undergoing severe persecution, and Scripture commands that we empathize with and pray for them (Rom. 12:15; Heb. 13:3). Second, as society becomes more and more secular, persecution may be right around the corner. We must be ready at all times for the seeming “triumph” of evil. Third, we must ask ourselves the extent to which we water down our Christian testimony in order to be accepted by all; compromise is a major problem in Western Christianity. Finally, persecution is one type of trial (1 Pet. 1:6–7; James 1:2–4), and we can apply these principles to the trials of life. We all go through difficult times, and both perseverance and faith in God are called for at all times. Furthermore, the counterpart to trials is triumph over sin and temptation, and we all need the teaching of this book.

The second section, 1:12–16, describes the glorified Christ in images drawn from a wide cross-section of the OT. Jesus is presented as exalted (Dan. 7:13, “like a son of man”), dignified (the robe and sash), wise (the hair), perceptive in judgment (the eyes), glorified and omnipotent (the feet), powerful and authoritative (the voice), in complete control (holding the stars), the judge of all (the mouth), and glorious (the face). Two further factors predominate: he is one with God (several of these images were attributed to Yahweh in the OT), and he is the fulfillment of all OT longing and prophecy (note the breadth of the OT allusions). In this we are called to awesome worship and a new realization of the seriousness of the issues addressed in this book. We had better pay the closest possible attention to the warnings and promises of this book.

The final section (1:17–20) contains three parts. The first (1:17–18) adds to the descriptions of Christ in 1:5, 12–16 the twin concepts of Jesus’ eternity and his power over the evil cosmic

forces. As a result of his death and resurrection, he has gained control over heaven and earth (cf. Matt. 28:18). Like Yahweh in Rev. 1:8, Jesus is “the First and the Last,” sovereign over all history and indeed over all forces. It is good for us to remember this when we are tempted to center on the earthly over the heavenly realities. The second part (1:19) expands the commission to write from 1:11 to include an eschatological overview of the perspective of this book: it combines past, present, and future as God brings history to a close and institutes eternity. Finally, 1:20 establishes a pattern that will be seen again in this book, interpreting the two key symbols: the stars are the angels given authority over and corporately identified with each church, and the lampstands are the churches themselves. From this the reader understands that this book is meant for all of us who are God’s people. We are called to accountability from the fact that we are his “lampstands,” called to be lights in this world, to take his message to the ends of the earth (see on 1:6–7, 12).

Additional Notes

1:11. The aorist imperative **πέμψον** is followed first by the dative (“to the seven churches”) and then by a series of **εἰς** phrases enumerating each church. There is no difference of meaning, as the prepositional phrases are in apposition to the dative.

1:12. The witness theme was closely connected to the “lamp”/“lampstand” metaphor (there is no clear distinction between the two) in Jesus’ teaching and the early church. In Mark 4:21 (par.) the “lamp” is not to be “hidden” under a basket but “disclosed” on a “lampstand,” a clear reference to the eschatological message of kingdom truths made known to all. In Matt. 5:15/Luke 11:33 this “light . . . on its stand” is intended to “give light to everyone in the house” (Matthew) so “those who come in may see the light” (Luke). In Phil. 2:15 the church is described as “stars” shining in a perverse world, a metaphor most link with Matt. 5:14–16 in a mission sense. In a dark world the people of God will be “the light of the world” (Matt. 5:14) and radiate God’s light as heavenly “light bearers” (Phil. 2:15). This is the basic meaning of the church as a “lampstand” in Rev. 1:12.

1:13. The connection with the Son of Man figure in the Gospels is indirect (the phrase has the article in the Gospels but lacks it here) but nevertheless apparent. There are thirteen Son of Man sayings in the Gospel of John, and especially in the “lifted up” sayings (3:14; 8:28; 12:34—John’s version of the passion predictions) the idea of an exalted, glorified figure is clear. Further exaltation is seen in John 1:51 (the angels ascending and descending); 3:13 (descending from heaven); 5:27; 6:27; 9:35 (authority to give life); and 13:31 (the glorified Son of Man). Parallels with the Son of Man in Rev. 1:13 and 14:14 are likely. The exact nuances of Jesus’ Son of Man sayings are highly debated, with many like Casey (1979) and Lindars (1983) arguing that there was no Danielic imagery in Jesus’ usage, but that he utilized the “son of man” only as a circumlocution for “I.” All sayings that derive clearly from Daniel (e.g., Mark 13:26; 14:62) were therefore late additions from the early church. As S. Kim (1983) and Aune (*DJG* 775–81) point out, however, it is circular reasoning to say that since Jesus only spoke in Aramaic as a self-reference, all exalted Danielic imagery must have been added by the early church. It is not a case of either-or but of both-and. At times Jesus meant “son of man” as a circumlocution for “I,” while on other occasions “Son of Man” had exalted overtones. In the latter sense it clearly referred to Jesus as the divine Son of God in terms of both suffering and vindication/glory, and as an authoritative figure.

Aune’s excellent discussion of the identity of the “one like a son of man” with the “Ancient of days” in Dan. 7:13 LXX deserves closer attention. Bruce (1986: 1597) argues that the LXX of Dan. 7:13 does equate the two, while Jeansonne (1988: 98–99) does not. The key is whether the LXX reads **ὡς παλαιὸς ἡμερῶν** (so Rahlfs) or **ἕως παλαιὸς ἡμερῶν** (so Jeansonne and the critical edition by Ziegler). The first assumes identity while the second distinguishes the son of man from the Ancient of Days. Aune (1997: 91–92) points out the weaknesses of Jeansonne’s theory that the **ὡς** is a later corruption of an original **ἕως** and tentatively agrees that Rev. 1:13 is part of a tradition equating the Son of Man with the Ancient of Days. While the LXX can be debated, Rev. 1:13 clearly equates the two.

1:15. A text-critical problem arises because **πεπυρωμένης** is grammatically difficult. As a feminine genitive participle it cannot modify either the nominative **οἱ πόδες** or the dative **καμίνῳ**. Therefore other ancient scribes have seemingly altered it to **πεπυρωμένῳ** so it could modify **καμίνῳ** (as in 2432 2053 ² and several ancient versions) or to **πεπυρώμενοι** so it could modify **οἱ πόδες** (as in P 046 1 94 and other minuscules). Most scholars (and Metzger 1994: 663–64) prefer **πεπυρωμένης** because it has decent manuscript evidence (A C Primasius) and best explains the other scribal emendations. The difficulty is what it modifies. Most likely it is a genitive absolute modifying the feminine noun **καμίνῳ**. As such it further describes the “gleaming brass” as “refined in a furnace.”

1:16. Grammatically, **ἔχων** seems to be a participle modifying **εἶδον** in 1:12, but it is more likely the first of many participles in the Apocalypse that stand as a finite verb (4:7; 10:2; 11:1; 12:2; 14:1; 17:5; 19:12; 21:12, 14, 19; see Wallace 1996: 653). Still, all of 1:16–20 is a

single idea, and all of the eight (or ten, depending on how one counts) details form a single description of the glorified Christ and are meant to be understood together. In the next clause the participle ἐκπορευμένη modifies ῥομλαία but also functions as its verb and so seems to be another finite use of the participle paralleling the ἔχων clause. Moreover, both are present participles that show the work of Christ in progress. With 1:12, this would be translated, “And I turned and saw . . . one like a son of man. . . . He was holding seven stars in his hand, and a sharp two-edged sword was coming of his mouth.” The repetition of the cognate compound ἐκ- emphasizes the movement of the sword “out of” his mouth and heightens the tongue metaphor (see n. 10).

1:16. John’s choice of ἡ ὄψις is unusual, since it is found elsewhere only in John 7:24 (judging by “appearance”) and 11:44 (Lazarus). Thus it is an expression unique to John and more likely means “face” than “outward appearance” (the other meaning) in this context, especially due to the connection with the transfiguration. Another possible parallel is Judg. 5:31, which describes those who love God as “like the sun when it rises in its strength.” This closely resembles λαίνειν τῇ δυνάμει αὐτοῦ. In Judges it concludes the Song of Deborah celebrating Israel’s victory over Sisera and the Canaanite king Jabin. The conclusion has two parts: that all the enemies of God and Israel perish in like manner, and that God’s people be greatly exalted. This latter part has its greatest fulfillment in the exalted Christ. By depicting Christ “shining in all his strength,” John gives the perfect conclusion to the imagery of 1:12–16. The addition “all its strength” pictures the sun on a cloudless day exerting all its power.

1:20. The grammar of this verse is difficult. Some (Beckwith, R. Charles, Thomas) think that τὸ μυστήριον is an accusative absolute in apposition with the nominatives that follow, “seven stars” and “lampstands,” in the second half of the verse. The difficulty is that it is followed by the genitive τῶν ἑπτὰ ἀστέρων and then the accusative τὰς ἑπτὰ λυχνίας τὰς χρυσᾶς. These two nouns are parallel in thrust, “the mystery of the seven stars . . . and of the seven golden lampstands,” and yet different cases. Therefore, most take “mystery” and “lampstand” to be parallel, so that the first is a whole unit, “mystery of the seven stars,” and “the seven golden lampstands” is the second unit, even though it too is part of the “mystery.” Yet why are they accusative? They cannot be objects of γράψον or the three ἄ phrases that follow in verse 19, for this introduces a completely new topic. As Swete (1911: 21) says, the accusatives probably anticipate the contents of the second half of the verse. He translates it, “As for the mystery of the seven stars . . . and as for the seven lampstands.” John is thinking ahead to the interpretation of the stars and lampstands and so places “lampstands” in the accusative as well.

B. Letters to the Seven Churches (2:1–3:22)

The prologue (1:1–8) and the inaugural vision (1:9–20) set the tone and introduce the main characters for the rest of the book, the forces of good (Christ and the churches) and evil (the world rulers and cosmic powers). There we learned that Jesus is indeed the glorified Christ who is in control not only of the churches (1:12–13, 16a) but also of the secular rulers (1:5) and the evil forces (1:18). Thus the scene is set for the letters to the churches of Asia Minor, detailing the effects of the conflict between good and evil in the lives of the Christians, against whom the world is at war. It is important to realize that the visionary medium does not cease at the end of the first chapter but continues through the third. The letters are in this sense sent from Christ to the churches and are part of his “revelation” through John (1:1–2). It is also helpful to realize that the introductory *γράψον* (*grapson*, write) in each letter reenacts the commission to write in 1:11, 19. In other words, chapters 2 and 3 are part of the introductory vision in 1:9–3:22.

At the same time, these are letters, in a sense form letters since they all have the same basic outline (see further below), to the churches of Asia Minor. There is considerable difference of opinion as to their literary function. R. H. Charles (1920: 1.37) represents the older view in saying that they were separate letters sent originally to each of the churches and then collected together and reedited to fit this book. The close ties with surrounding contexts makes this difficult, however, and not many have followed him recently. In the opposite extreme Schüssler Fiorenza (1991: 53) believes that they are not truly letters to individual churches but rather are a rhetorical device to present the problems addressed in the book as a whole. In this sense the letter to Ephesus will not address that church, nor will the letter to Smyrna discuss actual problems endemic to that church. Instead, all are rhetorically utilized to describe the churches in Asia Minor as a whole. However, the historical details from the letters fitting each locale (see below) make this difficult. As Sweet (1979: 77) says, “It is in fact clear that John had intimate pastoral knowledge of each congregation and was dealing with actual situations in each place.” Most others believe that they are addressed both to individual churches and to all of Asia Minor. As stated in the discussion of 1:11, the churches were natural centers for disseminating information to the other churches of the province, so the problems in those churches were also representative of the rest of the churches. Each letter ends with “hear what the Spirit says to the churches,” so all the churches of Asia Minor were to heed the promises and warnings given to each church and apply it to themselves. This is the most likely option and will guide the discussion below. Aune (1990: 182–204; 1997: 126–29) calls them “royal or imperial edicts” that contain divine pronouncements from the risen Christ for the churches.

There is, however, one more theory, belonging to classical dispensationalism, that these are not so much letters to individual churches (Bullinger 1909: 68 would say these are not letters at all but are entirely prophetic) as a historical plan prophesying the seven future periods of the church age (so Chafer, Walvoord). Therefore, Ephesus stood for the early church, Smyrna the period of persecution in the patristic era, Pergamum the time of Constantine, Thyatira the Middle Ages,

Sardis the Reformation, Philadelphia the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (missionary outreach), and Laodicea the modern era (time of growing apostasy before the return of Christ). Thomas (1992: 508–10) outlines the three major arguments for this position: the moral conditions are so varied that they cannot simply describe the church of John’s day; the prophetic atmosphere extends beyond the first century; and the latter three churches especially extend all the way to the parousia; the correspondence between the periods of church history and these seven letters cannot be just accidental. However, the details of the seven churches do not fit merely the epochs of the church. It is clear from the text that the characteristics of these letters were meant for all the churches of Asia Minor and indeed for all the periods of church history. Many have noted that Sardis, for instance, could be made to fit virtually any period of church history. Therefore even dispensational scholars like Thomas (see his excellent discussion, 1992: 511–15) opt for the view that the letters address historical situations in Asia Minor, not periods of church history. This does point out a major function of the letters, however: to address practical problems that are found in all churches (each letter ends with “hear what the Spirit says to the *churches*”). What we are to do with these seven is to ask, To what extent does this situation fit our church? How can we maximize the strengths and minimize the weaknesses seen in these churches?

As said earlier, these are form letters. A form-critical study would note the following sevenfold outline, with each aspect introduced by a formula repeated in the letters (for more detailed discussion, see Aune 1997: 119–24):

- I. Introduction
 - A. Address (“to the angel of the church . . . write”)
 - B. Prophetic messenger formula and character of Christ (“these are the words of him who . . .”)
- II. Body of the letter, consisting of an analysis of the strengths and weaknesses, each with an introductory formula
 - A. Strengths and weaknesses
 - 1. Strengths (“I know your deeds . . .”)
 - 2. Weaknesses (“Yet I hold this against you . . .”)
 - B. Solution (imperative commands to “repent” et al.)
- III. Conclusion
 - A. Call to listen (“Let anyone who is willing to hear listen to what the Spirit says to the churches”)
 - B. Challenge to overcome (“to anyone who overcomes”) with attendant eschatological promises intended for those who overcome

The balance is obvious, with both introduction and conclusion having two parts, and the body three (under two primary categories). Also, the order of the conclusion varies, with the last four letters reversing the call to listen and the challenge to overcome. Many have noted that there are indeed seven parts to the form, but several of the letters do not have all seven elements. The letters to Smyrna and Philadelphia do not contain any weaknesses, and the letter to Laodicea does not contain any strengths (interestingly, the weakness of that church is also placed under “I know your deeds” to give it greater rhetorical power). Like most form-critical studies, this is only an approximation, and it is difficult to know how much symbolic weight should be assigned to the sevenfold outline (utilized in four of the seven letters). On the whole, it is still present, and in light

of the sevenfold organization throughout the Apocalypse, it is likely that some significance should be attached, especially since there are seven churches and seven parts; probably this number emphasizes that these letters provide the perfect message from God for these churches.

Finally, many (Beasley-Murray, Schüssler Fiorenza, Roloff, Krodel, Beale) have noted the similarity of these to prophetic messages and letters from the OT (e.g., Jer. 29:1–23; 2 Chron. 21:12–15). The formulas build on prophetic patterns and are intended to take the readers back to similarities with Israel in the prophetic period. In particular, this makes more powerful the warnings and promises. Will the readers be like apostate Israel or the righteous remnant in heeding (or ignoring) the contents of these letters? These letters are exhortations attempting to draw the readers closer to God. Harrington (1993: 56) says it well:

The messages peg Revelation firmly to our world. It is a word of hope addressed to people who need hope, people who may falter. The messages, like so much of the New Testament, bring us encouragement. There never has been a perfect Christian community. Christians have been faithful and heroic, and they have been frail and vacillating. It is not enough for us to find comfort in the word to Philadelphia; we must also hearken to the word to Laodicea.

1. Letter to Ephesus (2:1–7)

One of the four most powerful cities in the Roman Empire (with Rome, Alexandria, and Syrian Antioch), Ephesus,[1] a city of more than a quarter of a million people, lay at the harbor where the Cayster River met the Aegean Sea in western Asia Minor. In ancient times it had become a major city after being captured by Croesus of Lydia (550 B.C.), who contributed greatly to rebuilding the temple of Artemis and established the city. Alexander the Great moved the population from the temple site to the harbor, and a thriving city developed. The temple (called the “Artemision”) had been burnt to the ground but was rebuilt in the fourth century and became one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. Ephesus quickly became a center of commerce and trade for all of western Asia Minor, one of the most prosperous provinces in the Roman Empire. Under the Syrian conqueror Antiochus III (197 B.C.), it became the capital of the region. It came under Roman control in 133 B.C., but at first there was considerable anti-Roman sentiment, and indeed the city joined a revolt by Mithridates VI, put down by Pompey in 69 B.C. Things settled down after that, and during the reign of Augustus, Ephesus and Pergamum were rivals for prominence as the capital of the province of Asia.[2] Ephesus became the greatest city of the area, with major construction projects and a thriving commercial and religious life. Three great trade routes met at the city: from the Euphrates by way of Laodicea and Colosse, from Galatia by way of Sardis, and from the Maeander Valley in the southeast corner of Asia Minor.

There is a difference of opinion as to the silting of the harbor. Traditionally, it has been thought that Ephesus was in decline due to alluvium deposits that were carried into the harbor by the Cayster River and were progressively blocking it in. The Romans had spent considerable effort, but the success of those reclamation projects was questionable. As Oster (*ABD* 2:543) points out, however, documents from the second and fifth centuries A.D. may indicate that the attempts to make the harbor accessible were successful, showing that the harbor had not silted up. In that case, Ephesus was not an endangered city at the time Revelation was written.

Religiously, Ephesus was best known for its temple to the fertility goddess Artemis (Roman Diana). The “Artemision” (see Acts 19:23–41) was outside the city (northeast of it) and had literally thousands of priests and priestesses, many of them sacred prostitutes. Biguzzi (1998a: 279) states that it was the largest building in the ancient world and the first major temple made completely out of marble. The temple was four times the size of the Parthenon in Athens, 425 feet long and 220 feet wide, with 127 pillars 60 feet high. There were enough gifts, donations, and bank deposits to make it the pillar of Ephesian wealth and the leader of the province of Asia. Also, it was guardian of a statue to the goddess that was supposedly a meteorite from heaven—to be sure, it was not sculpted like any of the great Hellenistic statues but was a somewhat shapeless, black, many-breasted rock. The power of this cult is seen in the riot of Acts 19:23–24, caused simply by chanting “Great is Artemis of the Ephesians” (19:28). Ephesus was the home of many sacred temples, however, including some to the emperors (Augustus himself commissioned one to Julius Caesar in 29 B.C.). The imperial cult thrived there. Indeed, under Domitian (81–96) Ephesus was named “warden” or guardian of the imperial cult (called a “temple keeper”), and a temple to Domitian was built. As Acts 19:19–20 tells us, there was great interest in magic and sorcery. There was also a significant Jewish population, although archeology has yet to unearth evidence of any synagogues. Yet both the NT (Luke and Paul) and Josephus testify to the Jewish

presence, and the latter even mentions that they had achieved citizenship (*Ant.* 13.3.2 §125).[3] The church was apparently established by Priscilla and Aquila, who had been left there by Paul in A.D. 52, and they were aided by Apollos (Acts 18:18–25). Paul returned and spent two years and three months there (Acts 19), apparently using Ephesus as a center for evangelizing the whole region (19:10). Later the church struggled with false teachers (Eph. 4:14; 1-2 Timothy; perhaps 1 John), which is also attested here in 2:2, 6.

One of the amazing features of these letters is the extent to which each church is addressed through the history of the city in which it resides. It is hard to imagine more creative and rhetorically powerful letters than these. Each reader in the individual city is reminded of the extent to which they are part of this world, for their churches all too often resemble their cities. This builds on the NT pattern of teaching in which believers are called to be citizens of heaven more than earth (Phil. 3:17–21), seeking heavenly more than earthly treasure (Matt. 6:19–20), and considering themselves to be “aliens and strangers” on this earth (1 Pet. 1:1, 17; 2:11).

- a. Address: commission to write (2:1a)
- b. Prophetic messenger formula: the character of Christ (2:1b)
- c. Strengths (2:2–3)
- d. Weakness (2:4)
- e. Solution (2:5–6)
- f. Call to listen (2:7a)
- g. Challenge to overcome (2:7b)

Exegesis and Exposition

¹To the angel of the church in Ephesus, write: “This is what the one who grasps the seven stars in his right hand, who walks in the midst of the seven golden lampstands, says: ²I know your deeds, namely your toil and endurance, and [I know] that you cannot tolerate evil people. You tested those calling themselves apostles (indeed, they are not), and found them to be false. ³You have maintained your endurance and bore much for my name’s sake and have not grown weary. ⁴But I hold this against you: You have abandoned the love you had at first. ⁵Therefore, remember how far you have fallen. Repent and do the works you did at first. If you do not, I am going to come and remove your lampstand from its place, if you do not repent. ⁶But you have this in your behalf, that you hate the Nicolaitans’ deeds, which I also hate. ⁷Let the one who has an ear heed what the Spirit says to the churches. I will give to the overcomer the privilege of eating from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.”

a. Address: Commission to Write (2:1a)

The indirect object τῷ ἄγγέλῳ (*tō angelō*, to the angel) and the aorist imperative γράψον (*grapson*, write) are reversed, with the imperative uncharacteristically last for emphasis. This is the case in all seven letters, and it makes the commission rhetorically very forceful. As stated in 1:20, the “angel” is both the guardian over the city and corporately identified with the city, so the letter is sent to the Ephesian church as a whole via the angel. This is in keeping with 1:1–2, in which the Apocalypse is sent from God through Christ to an angel and then to John to give to the churches. Thus the angel has the basic biblical function of “messenger” to the church.^[4] However, the angels function as more than messengers here. In several places in the NT (e.g., 1 Cor. 11:10 [perhaps 4:9 if “angels” there are good rather than evil angels]; Heb. 13:2; 1 Pet. 1:12) angels function as authoritative “witnesses” overseeing the plan of God as it works out among his people (see Reid, *DPL* 21). Their presence in a passage always adds eschatological force to the message as a reminder that divine forces are at work and watching. Munger (1998: 206–7) notes four functions of

the “angel” in these seven letters: (1) There is corporate identity between the angel and the church, with the singular “angel” referring both to the church as a whole and to each person in it; (2) since each church was a distinct unit made up of its own unique parts, separate letters were needed for each “angel” behind them; (3) the presence of the angel stresses that each church is a spiritual entity with a celestial or heavenly life “living figuratively in the *right hand* of Christ, under his guidance and protection” (Kiddle 1940: 17); (4) they are servants of God carrying out his orders to reform, challenge, and help these churches.

The Ephesian church was proud of its position not only as “the metropolis of Asia” (as Ephesus was called) but also of its heritage as the mother church of the region. Therefore, it is natural that this be the first church addressed, not only for its status but also because the mail route for these letters would naturally begin there (see on 1:11).

b. Prophetic Messenger Formula: The Character of Christ (2:1b)

Τάδε λέγει (*tade legei*, This is what . . . says) is a prophetic formula built on OT patterns^[5] that introduces Christ’s description in each of the seven letters. It will be clear as we study the letters that the character of Christ adduced in each letter is perfectly chosen to address the needs of that church. These characteristics remind the Ephesian church of key truths they have begun neglecting. Since Ephesus is the mother church, she must realize that Christ, not her, “holds the seven stars” and “walks among the lampstands.” There is no room for pride, for it is Christ alone who is sovereign, not any church. The two characteristics are drawn from 1:16 and 1:13, respectively. It is interesting that the two were at the beginning and toward the end of the vision in 1:12–16, and that the order is reversed here, probably to follow the order in the address in which the angel is mentioned before the church.

There are two significant changes to the description in 1:13, 16. First, the more emphatic κρατῶν (*kratōn*, grasp) is used (1:16 has ἔχων, *echōn*, hold) to make the sovereign control of Christ over the stars/angels more graphic and rhetorically powerful. Second, Christ is portrayed as περιπατῶν ἐν μέσῳ (*peripatōn en mesō*, walking in the midst of) the churches (1:13 has just “in the midst of”). As in the first change, the meaning is the same but more emphatic. The imagery of “walking” combines the ideas of concern for and authority over the church. While there is some debate as to whether the primary thrust is “watchful care over” or “power over” the churches (see Thomas 1992: 131–32, contra Ladd 1972: 38) there is no reason to choose one over the other, for both are connoted. Christ is present among his people and is both watching over them and watching them. The disciplinary aspect is certainly present in a letter which warns that Christ might “come to you and remove your lampstand from its place” (2:5).

c. Strengths (2:2–3)

The five churches that have strengths all begin this section with οἶδα τὰ ἔργα σου (*oida ta erga sou*, I know your works; cf. 2:2, 19; 3:1, 8, 15). Mounce (1998: 68 n. 6) notes that οἶδα cannot be read as mere knowledge of facts in this context, and Horstmann (*EDNT* 2:494) says that in John it means intuitive or certain knowledge whenever the subject is Jesus. This would be true also of Revelation; it occurs seven times in the letters of chapters 2 and 3 (2:9, 13, in addition to the five above), always with the idea of absolute knowledge.^[6] Also, the ἔργα are more than just “good deeds” but refer to the whole spiritual walk of the believer, as defined by the contents of the “deeds” in the letters. Here ἔργα is further defined by two exegetical καὶ appositives, καὶ τὸν κόπον καὶ τὴν ὑπομονήν

σοῦ (*kaiton kopon kaitēn hypomonēn sou*, namely, your toil and endurance). These two nouns govern the following discussion, with the “toil” expanded in the rest of 2:2 and the “endurance” in 2:3 (so R. Charles 1920: 1.49; Thomas 1992: 133). By “toil,” John means hard work. The term is used by Paul to designate the exacting labor he did to support himself (cf. 1 Thess. 2:9; 2 Thess. 3:8; and also of missionary “toil,” 1 Cor. 15:58). It is used twice in the Apocalypse (here and 14:13) for the Christian “labor” that will reap rewards. “Endurance” is also combined with “work” and “toil” in 1 Thess. 1:3, and the three might have been an early catechetical triad for the Christian life.[7]

The successful “labor” of the Ephesian church entailed a battle with false teachers, a situation seen in Ephesians (4:14), Colossians, the Pastoral Epistles, and 1 John as an ongoing problem in Asia Minor. First, they “could not endure evil people,” with κακοῦς (*kakous*) describing the basic character of the false teachers as “evil.” In Rev. 16:2 κακοῦς is synonymous with πονηρός (*ponēros*, evil), and both (as here) refer to moral and spiritual evil (both aspects are stressed in the seven letters for the false teachers). The strength of the antipathy that the Ephesians showed these heretics is seen in οὐ δύνη βαστάσαι (*ou dynē bastasai*, not able to endure). Literally, the verb means to “pick up” or “carry” but in certain contexts can mean to “bear” intense heat (Matt. 20:12) or the weaknesses of others (Rom. 15:1). The Ephesians were not able to “bear” these evil teachers.

The first statement is passive (“not able to bear”). John now turns to their active response. Building on OT mandates, they “tested” (ἐπίρασας *epeirasas*)[8] the claims of these false teachers, used for putting someone to the test to see if they are valid. It is the basic term in both OT and NT for a critical examination of a person’s claims. In 1 John 4:1–3 believers are called to “test” (there δοκιμάζω, *dokimazō*, but with the same basic meaning)[9] the “spirits” of false teachers to ascertain whether they are “from God” (see also Matt. 7:15–20; 1 Thess. 5:21). Apparently, these heretics[10] (for more detailed interaction with their teachings, see 2:6 on “Nicolaitans”) acted like wandering missionaries/teachers and went from house church to house church calling themselves “apostles.” Paul had warned the Ephesians in Acts 20:29 of “savage wolves” who would “come in among you and . . . not spare the flock.” That prophecy had now come true once more, and unlike the outcome related in 1 and 2 Timothy, the Ephesian church had now triumphed over them.

In the early church “apostle” was used two ways: in a particular sense to describe the leaders chosen by God for the church (the Twelve, Paul, and a few others like Barnabas [Acts 14:14] or James [Gal. 1:19]), and in a general way to describe church “representatives” who traveled from place to place with complete authority from the sending church (e.g., 2 Cor. 8:23; Phil. 2:25). It is often thought that their claim was in the latter sense (see Beckwith, Morris, Ladd, Sweet [who compares them with the itinerant teachers of the Didache]), but that is by no means certain. In 2 Cor. 11:5 and 12:11 Paul’s opponents are (perhaps mockingly) called “super-apostles,” and it is hardly likely they would have placed themselves on a level below Paul. These self-labeled “apostles” here were like those of 2 Corinthians, calling themselves the divinely chosen leaders and teachers of the church. John now switches from the past “tested” to the present tense καὶ οὐκ εἰσίν (*kai ouk eisin*, and they are not)[11] to indicate that the claims of these heretics are still not valid. [12] Therefore, the Ephesians found[13] their claims to be ψευδεῖς (*pseudeis*, false). In other words, it was evident that they were a pack of liars, pretending to be something that they were not. Ephesus later became known as a church that would not tolerate false teachers (Ign. *Eph.* 9.1ff.).

After the description of their “toil” in 2:2b, John turns to their ὑπομονήν (*hypomonēn*, endurance). In 2:2, 3 it refers to patient perseverance in the midst of trying circumstances. In a

sense “overcoming” (2:7, 11, 17, 26; 3:5, 12, 21) is the result of the process of endurance. Together they form one of the major themes of this book. The noun ὑπομονή (the verb does not occur in Revelation) occurs seven times (1:9; 2:2, 3, 19; 3:10; 13:10; 14:12), always in a context of pervasive evil. It is combined with “faith” in 13:10, “obedience and faith” in 14:12, and “love and faith” in 2:19. In other words, it is a comprehensive concept referring to a life of trust and patient steadfastness in hard times. Christ elaborates on this concept by adding that they have ἐβάστασας διὰ τὸ ὄνομα μου (ebastasas dia to onoma mou, endured for my name’s sake). This is the same verb as in 2:2 (“could not endure evil people”). The added “for my name’s sake” means they have stood up for Christ in the midst of persecution (1:9) and false teaching (2:2),^[14] a frequent NT emphasis (Mark 13:13; Matt. 10:22; John 15:21; 1 Pet. 4:14). It is one thing to suffer deservedly, quite another to suffer “because of” (διὰ) the name of Christ, or because we stand up for him.

The final element produces a chiasm. The noun form in 2:2 has the order “toil”/“endurance” while the verbalization in 2:3 reverses the order to “endure”/“labor.” The verb κεκοπίακες (kekopiakes, have grown weary) builds on another aspect of the root form, the exhaustion caused by hard work. It is used figuratively here for spiritual exhaustion caused by persecution and the battles against false teachers. The Ephesian Christians have not only stood firm for orthodoxy but have both triumphed over the heretics and maintained their spiritual watchfulness.

d. Weakness (2:4)

The triumphant tone changes abruptly with ἀλλά (alla, but). Now an extremely serious problem, one that endangers the very life and future of the Ephesian church, must be introduced. The formula ἔχω κατὰ σοῦ (echō kata sou, I have this against you) in the seven letters describes the spiritual and moral problems of the churches. It indicates divine displeasure, and the “against you” warns of future judgment if the situation does not change. The problem of the Ephesians is the abandonment (ἀφῆκες, aphēkes, left or forsaken) of their “first love” (τὴν ἀγάπην σου τὴν πρώτην, tēn agapēn sou tēn prōtēn, your first love). Τὴν πρώτην does not refer to the “first” or primary love but almost certainly means “the love you had at first,” that is, shortly after their conversion. They had lost the first flush of enthusiasm and excitement in their Christian life and had settled into a cold orthodoxy with more surface strength than depth. The second generation of the church had probably failed to maintain the fervor of the first. They had fulfilled Christ’s prophecy in Matt. 24:12, “The love of many will grow cold.”

The major question is the referent for ἀγάπην. Many scholars assume that it is horizontal or brotherly love. For instance, Beasley-Murray (1974a: 75) says it “was primarily love for fellow men,” and Ladd (1972: 39) says, “The Ephesian converts had known such a love in their early years; but their struggle with false teachers and their hatred of heretical teaching had apparently engendered hard feelings and harsh attitudes toward one another to such an extent that it amounted to a forsaking of the supreme Christian virtue of love.” Others take it primarily as love for God (Stauffer, *TDNT* 1:53; Prigent; Walvoord; P. Hughes).^[15] However, a growing number (e.g., Mounce, Johnson, Krodel, Thomas, Giesen) recognize the difficulty of separating love for humans from love for God and Christ. The famous “summary of the Torah” in Mark 12:29–31 (cf. Matt. 22:37–39; Luke 10:27) combines the two:

“The most important [commandment],” answered Jesus, “is this: ‘Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’ The second is this: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no commandment greater than these.”

Throughout the NT love for God/Christ is emphasized (Rom. 8:28; 1 Cor. 2:9; 8:3; Eph. 6:24) as is love for our fellow believers (John 13:34; 15:12; 1 Thess. 4:9; 1 Pet. 1:22; 1 John 3:11, 14). Indeed, the one demands the other, for one cannot love God without loving his children and vice versa (1 John 2:9–10; 4:16, 20–21). In a striking parallel to this passage, love in 1 John was a test for orthodoxy (see 2:7–17; 3:10–24; 4:7–5:3). It is clear that the Ephesians loved truth more than they loved God or one another. This does not mean that they were not believers or that they had no love at all, for the commendations of verses 2–3 would be impossible in that case. Rather, their early love had grown cold and been replaced with a harsh zeal for orthodoxy.

e. Solution (2:5–6)

As in the other four letters addressing serious problems (Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Laodicea), the solution takes the form of a series of imperatives demanding repentance and change, followed by a warning of judgment if they do not repent. The first thing they must do is **μνημόνευε** (*mnēmoneue*, remember), a present imperative normally used for required conduct (BDF §§335–36), in this case their “memory” of the past. Like all terms of “knowing,” to “remember” is not just to bring it to mind but to act on it. As Childs (1962) says, remembering often included an “actualization” of the original experience: “Actualization is the process by which a past event is contemporized for a generation removed in time and space from the original event. When later Israel responded to the continuing imperative of her tradition through her memory, that moment in historical time likewise became an Exodus experience” (85).^[16] The situation is similar here. The Ephesians needed to “actualize” and thereby reenter their past experience of “first love.” Aune (1997: 147) points out that “remembering” was often used in OT and NT contexts to call the people to repentance and to “recapture earlier moral and spiritual standards” (Isa. 44:21; 46:8–9; Mic. 6:5; Rom. 15:15; Gal. 1:6–9; 3:2–3; 5:7; 1 Thess. 1:5–10; 2:13–14; 4:1–2).

In particular, they were to remember **πόθεν πέπτωκας** (*pothen peptōkas*, how far you have fallen). Some (Krodel 1989: 108; Roloff 1993: 45) take this to mean that the angel himself has become a “fallen angel” (note the singular verb; cf. 1 Enoch 6–18, 64–69; Jub. 5). This is hardly true literally, but there may be an echo of Isa. 14:12, “How you have fallen from heaven, O morning star, son of the dawn! You have been cast down to earth.” Note the connection with the “stars” of Rev. 1:20 and the casting down of a third of the stars by the dragon in 12:4. The point here is that the angel participates in their fallen state, not literally but for rhetorical effect. All of this is to highlight their past love and their present condition (**πόθεν**, “from what state/condition”) of coldness.^[17]

The only answer is to “repent” (**μετανόησον**, *metanoēson*), an aorist imperative that forms the single response to the ongoing “remembering.” The present imperative “remember” is followed by two aorist imperatives, “repent” and “do.” Most likely, the church is being told to begin reflecting on their past history. That will convict them of their present errors and cause them to “repent” of their error and change their actions. In other words, remembering is the basis of repentance.^[18] **Μετανοέω** is the basic NT term for a change of heart, involving repudiation of the past as well as embrace of a new lifestyle. Of the eleven uses in Revelation, seven are in these letters addressing every city with a spiritual weakness (Ephesus, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Laodicea; 2:5 [twice], 16, 21, 22; 3:3, 19), so it is the key verb telling how each church should respond to its spiritual problem. The form this repentance must take is not so much a new turn but a return to the past. They must **τὰ πρῶτα ἔργα ποιήσουν** (*ta prōta erga poiēson*, do the works [you did] at first). These **ἔργα** are not just “good works” but the “acts of love” toward God and one another that characterized the early years of their church. Their battle against the heretics could certainly be

construed as “good works,” but because it was not accompanied by love (see 1 Cor. 13:1–2), it was insufficient. In short, orthodoxy without orthopraxy is a false religion.

To make the point inescapable, John now states it negatively. The statement of divine judgment is surrounded by two such statements, εἰ δὲ μὴ (*eide mē*, if you do not) and ἐὰν μὴ μετανοήσης (*ean mē metanoēsēs*, except you repent). The two conditional particles (εἰ and ἐὰν) are synonymous in this context. The first is a regular idiom for “otherwise.” Still, the placement of conditionals framing the judgment statement produces a powerful effect, as it emphasizes a way out of the dilemma—repent!

The judgment to fall upon them, if they refuse to change their ways, is incredibly severe: God would remove their lampstand. Two debates arise here. The first is whether ἔρχομαί σοι (*erchomai soi*, I will come to you) refers to the parousia (e.g., Krodel, Sweet, Wall, Aune, Thomas) or to an imminent coming in judgment (e.g., Lenski, Ladd, Caird, Mounce, Beasley-Murray, Giesen, Beale). While the natural reading of the verse and the fact that this is a private letter to a single church might support the latter, there are strong reasons for an eschatological interpretation. Everywhere else in the first three chapters where ἔρχομαι occurs, it refers to the parousia (1:4, 7, 8; 2:16; [19] 3:10, 11). Also, in the Book of Revelation the parousia is presented as imminent, and the present tense of ἔρχομαι, preceding as it does the future κινήσω (*kinēsō*, I will remove), has this force.[20] Once again, however, it is probably a case of “both-and” rather than “either-or.” Scholars often find too great a dichotomy between present and future judgment in the book. There is an inaugurated force in passages such as this one. Christ’s coming in judgment in the present is a harbinger of his final coming. In this context Christ’s displeasure will be felt both in the present and at the final judgment.

The second issue is the exact connotation of the “removal” of their lampstand. Is it the loss of their witness, predicated on the earlier connection of “lampstand” with the church’s witness (cf. 1:12; so Johnson and Beale)? Or is it a more serious warning against apostasy and the subsequent loss of their status as a church (so Beckwith, Mounce, P. Hughes, Krodel)? The seriousness of the language and the strong sense of warning throughout the book (for instance, in the overcoming passages) favors the latter. Hemer (1986: 53) points out that κινήσω has special meaning in the Ephesian context, since in its past the site of the city had been moved three times: “The danger was that the great harbor-city and its vigorous church would be moved back under the deadening power of the temple.” In other words, like the city fighting for its life against the silting of the harbor, the church was fighting for its life against the loss of its status as a church before God.[21] Fortunately, as Ignatius tells us (Ign. Eph. 1.1; 9.1), the church did heed this warning, repented, and once again became a thriving church.

The purpose of Rev. 2:6 coming at this point of the narrative is elusive. It could be a return to the commendation of 2:2–3, in which case it would be unique among the seven letters; or it could be a further encouragement to repent and persevere. In my view, it is both. The use of ἀλλά (*alla*, but) as in 2:4 establishes a contrast with the preceding context (2:3–5) and does indeed return to the thought of 2:2–3. At the same time, the hook word ἔργα (*erga*, works) repeats the term from 2:5a and connects the two: “You need to return to the works you did at first, but at least you hate the same evil works that I do.” The introductory τοῦτο ἔχεις (*touto echeis*, you have this) switches from the aorists of 2:4–5 (“abandoned . . . repent . . . do”) to the present tense. While they did fall away from love, they have managed to maintain their fighting (for the faith) spirit. This is then followed by another (see 2:2) ὅτι (*hoti*, that) noun clause that details the contents of the τοῦτο.

The language in the ὅτι clause is much stronger than 2:2–3. There they found the false teachers

to be “false,” but here they “hate” their “works.” An important key is the repetition of μισέω (*miseō*, hate) in both clauses: “you hate” and “I hate.” The hatred of the Ephesians parallels God’s own hatred. At first glance, this seems to contradict the “love” commandment of 2:4–5. However, love for God, fellow believers, and all made in the image of God does not entail an acceptance of their sin. The hatred here is not directed at the people but at their “works” (as in 2:5, this refers both to their deeds and their attitudes or morals). Still, such language is foreign in our society, where pluralism, relativism, and tolerance reign supreme. In many ecclesiastical circles today there is no such thing as heresy, for all beliefs are acceptable. I know of one seminary where a Buddhist is teaching New Testament, and many well-known theologians have been atheists.

Yet the Bible is adamant about God’s attitude toward false prophets/teachers. In the OT God hates both evil (Ps. 45:7; Prov. 6:16–19; Jer. 44:2–6; Zech. 8:17) and the people who commit it (Ps. 5:5; Hos. 9:15; Amos 6:8). In the NT we would expect a different atmosphere. We are told not to “hate” but to “love our enemies” (Matt. 5:43–47; cf. Rom. 8:35; 12:14; 1 Cor. 4:12) and to “do good to those who hate you” (Luke 6:27, 35; cf. Rom. 12:19–20). In John’s writings, hatred is primarily the world’s response to God/Christ (John 7:7; 15:18) and to Jesus’ followers (John 15:18–16:4). Nevertheless, God’s righteousness cannot tolerate sinful beliefs or actions. Hebrews 1:9 relates that Jesus “loved righteousness and hated wickedness.” However, the NT does not use “hatred” so much as “wrath” to define God’s reaction to sin (John 3:36; Heb. 3:11; 4:3), especially in terms of the final judgment (Rom. 2:5–8; 3:5; 5:9; 1 Thess. 1:10). Still, the emotional response here is not sub-Christian but in keeping with the seriousness of the sin committed by the Nicolaitans.

The Nicolaitan movement is difficult to define, for the only information we have is found in Rev. 2:6, 15, and probably in the discussions of the cults of Balaam (2:14) and Jezebel (2:20–23) (I argue later that these all describe the same movement). In a disputed statement of dubious worth, Irenaeus (*Against Heresies* 1.26.3) links them both with Nicolaus, one of the seven “deacons” of Acts 6:5, and with the teachings of the Gnostic heretic Cerinthus. Clement of Alexandria disagrees that Nicolaus had departed from the truth, saying his followers had misunderstood his teaching (*Stromata* 2.20). However, it is impossible to know how much of this is correct. Most do assume that there is some kind of proto-gnostic link, probably of the same kind opposed in the Pastorals and 1 John (also dealing with Asia Minor). Balaam is also used as an example in 2 Pet. 2:15 and Jude 11, providing possible parallels to its use here in Revelation. Furthermore, the immorality could parallel the gnostic libertinism of 1 John, and the “deep things [of Satan]” (Rev. 2:24) could be gnostic language.^[22] After all is said and done, however, there is too little in the texts to be at all certain about gnostic tendencies (see Hemer 1986: 93–94).

While we know next to nothing about their doctrine, we can be more certain of their practices. The key is the practices linked with Balaam (2:14–15) and Jezebel (2:20–23). The two sins found in both are idolatry and immorality.^[23] Therefore it is likely that the twin problems were syncretism (trying to accommodate the pagans by participating in practices like emperor worship; see Coutsoumpos 1997: 23–27) and an antinomian type of libertinism (showing freedom from the law by doing what one wishes; see Schüssler Fiorenza 1973: 568–69). Under Domitian the pressure from the imperial cult greatly increased, and it is probable that some Christians (indeed, this entire cult movement) capitulated under this pressure. In terms of the antinomian aspect, Hemer (1986: 94; cf. 87–94) tentatively connects this with the allusion to Paul in 2 Pet. 3:15–17 and concludes “that Nicolaitanism was an antinomian movement whose antecedents can be traced in the misrepresentation of Pauline liberty” (so also Coutsoumpos 1997: 27). DeSilva (1992: 293–94) states that this cult movement “lost its ethnic and religious identity” and therefore God’s blessing. They

participated in sacrificing to pagan deities, sacrifices required for membership in the trade guilds. Thus syncretism and accommodation to society were their basic sins. Finally, Watson (ABD 4:1107) notes two other oft-mentioned possibilities: that the very term “Nicolaitan” was not a movement as such but an etymological play on the Hebrew **נִכְלָאִים** (*bāla ʾām*, he has destroyed the people) or **בַּאֵל אֱלִים** (*ba ʾil ʾām*, lord of the people) or perhaps a Greek wordplay on **νίκα λαόν** (*nika laon*, he has conquered the people). However, these are overly speculative. In conclusion, we know little about their beliefs (although gnostic tendencies are quite viable) but can be confident regarding their practices, which involved immorality and a syncretistic participation in idolatry, especially emperor worship.

f. Call to Listen (2:7a)

This exhortation is built on Jesus’ call, “Let the one who has an ear to hear, listen” (Mark 4:9, 23; Matt. 11:15; Luke 8:8; 14:35; cf. Mark 8:18; Matt. 24:15), which functions as a prophetic warning to open one’s mind and heart to kingdom truths. In the key passage, Mark 4:9 (paralleled in Matt. 13:9), it concludes the parable of the sower and leads into Jesus’ teaching about God’s sovereign choice to “give” the kingdom “secrets . . . to you but not to them.” Beale (1999: 236–39) adds that this formula also stems from Isa. 6:9–10 (also used in Mark 4:10–12), indicating that some will hear but others will be blinded by the warning. Part of the meaning centers on God’s sovereignty in Revelation. Enroth (1990: 600–604) says it is a parenthetic formula following the synagogue pattern. He believes it goes beyond the immediate context to embrace the warnings of each letter, indeed of the whole book. These things are meant for his chosen ones. On the other hand, there is also a strong emphasis on the responsibility of God’s people to open their ears, and it could be translated, “Let the one who is willing to hear, listen.” In other words, God has made these truths available; now it is up to us to heed them. Throughout both testaments, “to hear” is “to obey.”

The second half of the saying centers on the Spirit as the medium of revelation. The prophetic word comes to us via the Holy Spirit, who is speaking to the churches. The Spirit was earlier described as the “sevenfold Spirit,” referring to his perfection as the revealer of truth (1:4; cf. 3:1; 4:5; 5:6). Building on David Hill (1971–72: 401–18), Bauckham (1993b: 115–18) argues that “Spirit” throughout Revelation refers to his activity through Christian prophets. In other words, the exalted Christ is speaking now[24] through the Spirit as he inspires John’s prophetic writing of these letters. While there is some truth to this, it is too reductionistic. The Holy Spirit is also speaking directly through these letters, and that is the more likely emphasis here. Moreover, the message of this letter is meant not just for Ephesus but for all “churches.” All who read this letter are to ask whether their church fits this situation and whether they too should “listen” and “repent.”

g. Challenge to Overcome (2:7b)

One of the most important messages of the book is the challenge to be a “conqueror” (**τῷ νικῶντι**, *tō nikōnti*, to the one who overcomes). It is an athletic and military metaphor that connotes superiority and victory over a vanquished foe. In the NT the military overtones are primary. For instance, the only Synoptic saying is Luke 11:22, Jesus’ programmatic statement on the binding of Satan, “when someone stronger attacks and overpowers [the ‘strong man, fully armed’—Satan]”. Of the twenty-six NT uses, twenty-one are in the Johannine corpus, fifteen in Revelation alone. Here it speaks of the eschatological war between the beast and the people of God. The white horse

goes out “to conquer” (6:2), and the beast both “conquers” the two witnesses (11:7) and is allowed by God (“was given power”) to “conquer” the saints for a time (13:7). But this victory is only provisional. Ultimate victory is with God and God alone. It is the Lamb—the King of kings and Lord of lords—who finally conquers (17:14). Yet this final victory is anchored in the past—as Jesus says in John 16:33, “I have conquered the world”—which is reflected in the final “overcomer” saying in Rev. 3:21, “To the one who overcomes, I will give the right to sit with me on my throne, just as I overcame and sat down with my Father on his throne.” As made clear in 5:5–6, the true victory was won on the cross, and the final battle in 19:17–21 is only the last act of defiance by an already defeated foe.

Our victory is a participation in his victory. It is critical to realize that in the seven letters the victory is a promise held out to all of them, even the weak churches of Sardis (3:5) and Laodicea (3:21). Yet it must be achieved through perseverance. According to Homcy (1995: 201), “Our lives must declare the victory of Jesus over sin and death, with confidence in the ultimate triumph of his work over all the power of the enemy.” Thus it demands faithfulness and a determination that we will place living for him alone above all earthly things (see also Strand 1990: 250–51). To be an “overcomer” in the eschatological war demands a day-by-day walk with God and dependence on his strength. In this sense there is also warning, as seen in the contrast between the “overcomer” and the “cowardly” in 21:7, 8. Only the one who conquers in Christ will stand on the crystal sea and sing hymns of victory as in 15:2 or “inherit” God’s kingdom as in 21:7. This warning is certainly stressed in the letter to Ephesus, standing as it does in great danger (2:5). Therefore, the overcoming theme in Revelation combines promise (God’s blessings on those who persevere) and warning (God’s judgment on those who fail to persevere). In short, overcoming in Revelation is analogous to πιστεύω (*pisteuō*, believe) in Paul, referring to an active trust in God that leads to faithfulness in the difficult situations of life lived for Christ.

The reward for the faithful is striking—they will participate in the blessing intended at creation but never realized by Adam and Eve—to “eat of the tree of life.” It is introduced by a critical term in Revelation, δώσω (*dōsō*, I will give).^[25] This verb is almost a formula in the seven letters to typify the future (it is always in the future tense in the following passages) rewards or “gifts” God has for the overcomers (2:7, 10, 17, 26, 28; 3:21). Whenever the verb is used of God in the book, as in the repetition of “was given” in 6:2, 4, 8, 11 (authority given to the four horsemen) and 13:5, 7 (authority given to the beast),^[26] it depicts divine sovereignty over all earthly and cosmic forces.

The promised gift is λαγεῖν ἐκ τοῦ ξύλου τῆς ζωῆς (*phagein ek tou xylou tēs zōēs*, to eat from the tree of life). In Gen. 2:9 the tree of life was placed in the garden; but in 3:22–24 Adam and Eve were not allowed to partake of this tree because of their sin, and an angel with a flaming sword guarded the tree, so they could not eat from it and gain immortality. In Prov. 3:18; 11:30; 13:12; and 15:4 it became a symbol for the life-giving properties of “wisdom” and righteous living. In Ezek. 47:12 (the passage behind Rev. 22:2) there were “many kinds of fruit trees” at the river flowing from the temple (alluding to the river in the Garden of Eden), and they bore fruit every month for food and healing. In Jewish apocalyptic (1 Enoch 24.3–25.6; 2 Esdr. [4 Ezra] 2:1–13; 8:50–52; T. Levi 18.9–12; T. Dan 5.12) the tree of life came to typify the eternal life given by God to his followers (see Wong 1998a: 212). This theme continues in 2:7 and 22:2, as the overcomers inherit God’s reward for their faithfulness (note here that the saints “eat from the tree,” an image directly linked to the fruit bearing of 22:7). In the final Eden the curse of the first Eden is reversed and eternal “life” is now given to God’s people.

Hemer (1986: 41–44) makes a convincing case that “the tree of life” in Revelation connotes the

cross (so also Kraft, Harrington, Beale); ξύλον (*xylon*, tree) most often refers to either the cross or the tree of life in the NT, and the two images may well be connected. In other words, it is the cross of Christ that produces life and makes it possible to inherit “the paradise of God.” Moreover, as will be seen in 5:6 and 13:8, the apocalyptic Lamb is portrayed as “slain.” Therefore, behind the tree of life and the final reward is the “tree” on which Christ was slain (cf. Gal. 3:13, a passage dependent on Deut. 21:22–23). This contrasts with the background of the temple of Artemis. Hemer (1986: 44–47) goes on to discuss literary and archeological evidence that the temple was originally a “tree shrine,” and that a symbol of Artemis well into the NT period was a date palm. In other words, this is also a further counter to the idolatry and immorality of Ephesus (as a fertility goddess, Artemis signified “life”); only the cross of Christ could be a “tree” that produced “life.”

The tree of life is further identified as existing ἐν τῷ παραδείσῳ τοῦ θεοῦ (*en tō paradeisō tou theou*, in the paradise of God). This shows that while the “tree” is anchored in the past (the cross), it will actually be experienced in the future glory of eternity. “Paradise” was originally a Persian term describing an enclosed garden or park. It was in the Jewish world that it took on a religious connotation (Jeremias, *TDNT* 5:765–68), picturing the reinstatement of the original Edenic paradise in the last days. Aune (1997: 154) adds that it was originally considered a heavenly region (connected with the “third heaven” in 2 Cor. 12:2–3; 2 Enoch 8.1) but in Revelation becomes part of the “new earth” (22:1–5). Here it is “God’s paradise” (possessive genitive), pointing forward to the “new heavens and new earth” of 21:1–22:5 and establishing a further contrast with the temple of Artemis that promised an earthly paradise but nothing that was lasting.^[27]

Summary and Contextualization

There are many parallels between the church at Ephesus and our situation today. The problem of heresy is even greater today, as there are literally thousands of cult movements worldwide. In this regard this church is a positive role model. Like Ephesus we need to endure in the midst of persecution and false teachers. We must learn to “test” the leaders in our churches and make certain that their orthodoxy is sound. We must do so carefully, however, for at the same time there are “heresy hunters” who attack for any doctrinal difference whatever and seem to be interested in power as much as in truth. The key is to separate between cardinal doctrines (issues that are clear in Scripture and essential for the Christian faith) and noncardinal issues (points that are not as clear in Scripture and are not essential for remaining a Christian). We must discipline believers on the first (“tested them . . . and found them false,” as Ephesus did) but dialogue on the second (agree to disagree and be “iron sharpening iron” to one another). The key is to allow the history of dogma (church history) to control our interaction on theological issues. We have known the cardinal doctrines for fifteen hundred years—the Trinity, the deity of Christ, the Holy Spirit (but not the charismatic debate), the return of Christ (but not the millennial issue), baptism (but not the mode), substitutionary atonement (but not Calvinism or Arminianism). We need to be clear about what heresy is but be firm when we encounter it (see Osborne 1991: 311–14).

The negative lesson of Ephesus relates to our love for God and for our fellow believers. As in husband-wife relationships, what good is it to claim we love God when he has little priority in our lives and we prefer the things of this world over the things of God? Jesus was quite adamant —“No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for^[28] the kingdom of God.” God wants our all, not just a small part of our lives. Also, he demands that there be an intense family

atmosphere in our churches. Throughout the NT, imagery of “brother” and “sister” predominates, and this is not just a casual metaphor. The church desperately needs a new sense of fellowship at the deepest level. It is sad when Christians are just as lonely as non-Christians. A church that has forgotten to love is a church that has ceased to be a church, and that is why Jesus warns that he will “remove its lampstand.” We too need to heed the warning and both “remember” (our own past) and “repent” (from our lack of concern for God and others). Then and only then can we experience “paradise” in the present as well as the future. Yet when we do learn to “conquer” not only heretics but our own sinful tendencies, we will experience the blessings of God in a new way and be assured of God’s “paradise.”

Additional Notes

2:2. Codex Sinaiticus, several minuscules, and the TR add a second σου after κόπος. There would be no significant change of meaning if it were added, as σου follows both the other nouns. Due to strong support for its absence (A C P etc.), most assume that later copyists added it to conform to the other two nouns in the series.

2:2. The grammar here is somewhat difficult. After the three nouns identifying the “work” of the Ephesians, the discussion switches to καὶ ὅτι followed by three successive verbs. It is most likely that we have here a third straight exegetical καί (with ὅτι introducing a noun clause functioning as a fourth object of οἶδα—“I know your works, your labor and patience, and that . . .”), thus expanding further the “works,” here especially the “toil” of the Ephesian church. The three verbs then spell out what the “labor” entailed.

2:3. There is an interesting progression of tenses in verse 3, from the present ἔχεις to the aorist ἐβάστασας to the perfect κεκοπίακες. It is likely that the first clause (present tense) is the overall statement, and that the other two further define it. The aorist “endure” describes the life of endurance (global aorist), and the perfect “not grown weary” describes the results of that process. As Swete (1911: 26) points out, the perfect tense “indicates a condition which continued when the endurance . . . was at an end.”

2. Letter to Smyrna (2:8–11)

Smyrna is the only city that has continued to the present day, having the modern name Izmir. Another harbor city with a thriving export trade thirty-five miles north of Ephesus, it was renowned for its beauty and its civic pride, calling itself “the first in Asia” as well as the birthplace of Homer (disputed by other cities). It maintained an excellent relationship with Rome and was one of four cities (with Ephesus, Pergamum, and Sardis) to host the provincial assembly. It was the first city in Asia to erect a temple to the goddess Roma (195 B.C.), and in A.D. 26, because of its long loyalty to Rome, it beat out ten other cities for the privilege of building a temple to the emperor Tiberias. In succeeding decades it became a center of the imperial cult. In 600 B.C. it had been destroyed by Alyattes, king of Lydia, but when Alexander the Great came through in 334 B.C. he commissioned that it be rebuilt. This was done in 290 B.C. by Lysimachus and Antigonos, two of his successors. The city was rebuilt closer to the harbor, and its architecture made it one of the most pleasing cities in Asia: famous temples (the temples of Zeus and Cybele were connected by a mall that was the envy of the ancient world), a group of buildings called “the crown of Smyrna,” an acropolis on Mount Pagos, and a beautiful roadway called “the Street of Gold.”

It had a large Jewish population that virulently opposed Christians. This may have been occasioned by the destruction of the temple and consequent anti-Jewish feeling in the Roman Empire. Christianity thus became a double threat, not only religious but political. It is common to theorize that the edict under Domitian demanding emperor worship made it easy to persecute Christians, and that the Jews were active in denouncing Christians to the authorities, possibly to deflect attention from themselves. Rome had given the Jews the right to practice their religion, and they did not want this precious privilege threatened. In addition, in the 80s Judaism had excommunicated the Christian “heretics” from their synagogues, and they wanted nothing to do with them. In A.D. 155 the famous bishop of Smyrna, Polycarp, was burned alive for refusing to call Caesar “Lord” during an extensive persecution instigated by the Jews. The Smyrna church itself had been founded either by some returning Jewish traveler present at Pentecost or (more likely) during the Pauline mission of Acts 19.^[1]

- a. Address and prophetic messenger formula (2:8)
- b. Situation (2:9)
- c. Coming affliction (2:10)
- d. Call to listen and challenge to overcome (2:11)

Exegesis and Exposition

⁸To the angel of the church in Smyrna, write: “This is what the one who is the First and the Last, who was dead and came alive, says: ⁹I know your affliction and poverty (but you are actually rich), and the slander of those who call themselves Jews (but they are not; actually they are the synagogue of Satan). ¹⁰Stop being afraid of what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison to be tested, and you will experience affliction for ten days. Be faithful to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life. ¹¹Let the one who has an ear heed what the Spirit says to the churches. The one who overcomes will never be hurt by the second death.”

a. Address and Prophetic Messenger Formula (2:8)

The address is the same as that for the letter to Ephesus (see on 2:1a). As with the first letter, the characteristics of Christ are specially chosen to address the needs of the church in Smyrna. First, Jesus is described as ὁ πρῶτος καὶ ὁ ἔσχατος (*ho prōtos kai ho eschatos*, the First and the Last). This title is used only of Christ in the book (1:17; 2:8; 22:13) and in 1:17 is connected to God as the Alpha and Omega (1:8; 21:6; the two occur together in 22:13, where they depict Christ). Both titles mean that God and Christ are sovereign over history, in control not only of the past but of the future. Christ is the eternal one, guaranteeing vindication for his suffering followers. The title is drawn from Isa. 44:6 and 48:12, noteworthy in light of the fact that the letter to Smyrna contains fewer OT allusions than any of the seven, perhaps due to the Jewish antagonism in Smyrna. While Smyrna proudly called itself “first” among the cities of Asia, it is Jesus alone who can validly be called “first,” and that in a cosmic sense. This message was especially relevant to a church undergoing terrible opposition; they needed to hear that Jesus was still preeminent and watching over them.

The second title is even more apropos: ὃς ἐγένετο νεκρὸς καὶ ἔζησεν (*hos egeneto nekros kai ezēsen*, who was dead and came alive). The past tenses of the verbs point to the historical events of Jesus’ death and resurrection. Like Smyrna itself (it died in 600 B.C. and was reborn in 290 B.C. to even greater magnificence), Jesus came alive again after his death. Again, 1:17–18 provides the material: “I was dead, and behold, I am alive for eternity” was borrowed from 1:18. The point here is that while Smyrna can take away one’s present life, Jesus guarantees one’s future life. A suffering church like Smyrna needed the assurance that their ultimate future was already secure, even though their present lives were distressing.

b. Situation (2:9)

This is one of only two churches (the other being Philadelphia) with no weaknesses. It is telling that these two were also the least significant of the seven churches in terms of numbers and influence. The current preoccupation of the modern church with numbers and influence must be reexamined. It is more important to be faithful than to be powerful. This is also one of two letters (with Pergamum next) without the formula “I know your (good) deeds.” Instead, the divine knowledge of (and empathy for) their situation is described. There are three things the exalted Christ “knows”—their tribulation, poverty, slander—and the presence of σου (*sou*, your) at the outset draws them into a unity. Also, the three would never be considered “strengths” today but rather “problems” or even “tragedies.” This is because the church today has forgotten the centrality of “the fellowship of his sufferings” (Phil. 3:10) for the early church. Suffering for Christ was a privilege, not just a sorrow. It was certainly “painful” (Heb. 12:11) but was also considered a participation in Christ at a deeper level. Smyrna suffered greatly but as a result was even more favored by God.

The first, τὴν θλίψιν (*tēn thlipsis*, affliction), describes the basic problem, and the other two are aspects of that “persecution.” The term has already been discussed in 1:9, where I noted that it refers to the sufferings of God’s people as part of the “tribulation” of the last days. Here the current sufferings of the Smyrna believers, rather than the eschatological element, is highlighted. The other two items describe the particularities of the affliction. Due to persecution the church has experienced τὴν πτωχείαν (*tēn ptōcheian*, poverty).^[2] Hemer (1986: 68) discusses the likely causes of such “poverty”: mobs (both Jewish and pagan, stirred up by Jewish hatred) destroying their property, the fact that Christians were often among the poorer classes to begin with, the liberality of Christian giving in times of pressure (cf. 2 Cor. 8:2–5), the loss of jobs in a pagan atmosphere. The simple fact of Jewish opposition meant that Christians would no longer enjoy the

protection and tolerance the Romans often granted Jewish people, for the Romans stopped giving the Christians the right to worship their God (an exception granted only to the Jewish people and for a while given to Christians as a Jewish sect). Poverty has often been the lot of God's followers, because the people of this world hate the children of light and often seek to do them harm (John 15:18–16:4). In the OT, "poverty" is viewed as an aberration not to be allowed among God's people. Since the land belongs to Yahweh and has been given in trust to his people as a whole, there should not be poverty (cf. Deut. 8:9; 15:1–18; 24:14–22). The prophets see the presence of poverty as a special proof of the apostasy of the nation as a whole, and "the poor" becomes a semitechnical term for the remnant of Israel as persecuted by the rebellious nation (e.g., Isa. 41:17; 51:21–23; 54:11). Both in the OT and the NT the poor have a special relationship to God as their protector. The first beatitude in both Matthew (5:3) and Luke (6:20) centers on the poor, and the promise in both is "theirs is the kingdom of God." In other words, God watches out for the poor and will vindicate them.

It is interesting that every time "poor" occurs in Revelation it is contrasted in some way with "rich." It is clear that both poverty and wealth (in the churches of Sardis and Laodicea) were major problems for these churches. Here *πτωχείων* is meant literally (they were poverty-stricken) while *πλούσιος* (*plousios*, rich) is used figuratively (they are rich spiritually). In light of 2:9c–10 some of the Jews in the town had brought charges against the believers, with the result that some had been imprisoned and probably lost their homes and possessions. Mounce (1998: 74) comments, "In an antagonistic environment it would be difficult for the Christian to make a living, and thus many were economically destitute. They may also have been the victims of mob violence and looting (cf. Heb. 10:34)." Beale (1999: 240) says that Rome was antagonistic toward new religions, especially those that did not deify the emperor; and the Jews, jealous that Gentile "God-fearers" were converting to Christianity in such numbers, were only too happy to inform the Romans that Christianity was not a Jewish sect.

However, this persecution had actually brought the church closer to God, as often happens. The exalted Christ could say at this point, "but you are rich."^[3] In other words, "in spite of the affliction you are going through, God has given you spiritual riches beyond your wildest dreams." In Mark 10:29–30 Jesus told the disciples that for every sacrifice they would receive a hundredfold return in this world and eternal life in the next world, but then added, "along with persecution." God would send spiritual blessings but would not remove the animosity and persecution (see the excellent discussion in Beasley-Murray 1978: 81), for that is participation in the way of Christ (Phil. 3:10; Col. 1:24; 1 Pet. 4:1–19). Note here the contrast with Laodicea: Smyrna is poor economically but rich spiritually, while Laodicea is rich economically but poor spiritually (3:17).

The second factor describing their "affliction" was "slander" (*τὴν βλασφημίαν*, *tēn blasphēmian*). Elsewhere in the book the term is used in its more basic NT sense of "blasphemy" against God (13:1, 5, 6; 17:3). The two, however, are closely connected. Slandering the people of God is one form of blasphemy against God. Jewish opposition to Christianity is quite common in the NT. Throughout the Book of Acts we see that the Jews were the primary opponents and caused many more problems than the Roman authorities, who often were reacting to Jewish complaints (e.g., 13:45–52; 14:19; 17:6–9, 13; 18:12–17; 21:27–40). This was nowhere more virulent than in Smyrna, with its large and highly visible Jewish population, many of whom were citizens and all of whom wished to protect their rights. In Mart. Pol. 12–13 we find a similar situation in the mid-second century. Ironically, the Jews denounced Polycarp and the church before the Roman authorities for defaming the emperor and the Roman religion by refusing to worship the emperor. Then they helped gather

wood to burn Polycarp even on the Sabbath! Yarbrow Collins (1986: 313) believes that this slander by the “synagogue of Satan” refers specifically to a group of Jews who instigated legal action in the Roman courts against the Smyrna Christians.

The rest of the verse is a stirring denunciation of their claim to be the people of God. They “say that they are Jews” but in reality οὐκ εἰσὶν ἀλλὰ συναγωγὴ τοῦ Σατανᾶ (*ouk eisin alla synagōgē tou Satana*, they are not but are the synagogue of Satan). In other words, the claim of these Jews^[4] to be the people of God is obviated by the fact that they are tools of Satan against God’s true people, the church. This is a point made often in the NT. In John 8:31–47 Jesus responds to the Jewish claim to be “the children of Abraham” by stating, “You belong to your father, the devil” (8:44). In Rom. 2:28–29 Paul says that a true Jewish person is not identified by outward (national origin) but by inward (trust in God and his Son) signs (cf. also Gal. 6:15), and in Rom. 11:17–21 Israel has been removed from God’s olive tree due to unbelief and the Gentiles grafted in. Thus the Jews of Smyrna may have called themselves “the synagogue of God” (cf. Num. 16:3), but the exalted Christ here states that they are actually “Satan’s synagogue.” The choice of Σατανᾶ (*Satana*, Satan) is deliberate, as the term is a Hebrew loanword meaning “adversary,” depicting this archenemy of God and his people as supremely hostile, filled with hatred and slander (Mounce 1998: 75 says that in Greek the term means “slanderer” or “false accuser”). The Jewish people in their opposition and slander of God’s people have become one with “Satan.” Bredin (1998: 160–64) adds that this phrase may also reflect the tension between the relationship of both Jews and Christians with Rome, specifically the Jewish charge that Christians were not “Judeans,” that is, exempt from the Roman demand to participate in their religious practices (see introduction, “Imperial Cult”). Thus the “synagogue of Satan” is also a synagogue in collusion with Rome, as they denounced Christians to the authorities.^[5]

c. Coming Affliction (2:10)

This is both a prophecy and a word of encouragement. First, Christ tells them μηδὲν ἰοβοῦ (*mēden phobou*, stop being afraid).^[6] The force of μηδὲν here is emphatic, “don’t be afraid of anyone.” The prohibition of fear in a time of trouble or persecution is a frequent biblical topic, building on Ps. 46:1–3 (“God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble. Therefore, we will not fear”) and Jesus’ own command in Matt. 10:28 and parallels (“Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell”). This theme continues in one form or another in most of the persecution epistles, such as Hebrews (cf. 10:31; 11:23, 27; 12:13; 13:3, 6) and 1 Peter (cf. 3:14–15; 4:12–14, 19). In Revelation there are no other passages as direct as this, but the use of “fear” is illuminating. Whenever the term is used of the saints, it refers to reverence for God (e.g., 11:18; 14:7; 15:4; 19:5), and whenever it is used of the earth-dwellers, it is terror in the face of judgment (e.g., 11:11; 18:10, 15). In the midst of terrible tribulation God’s people are called to fearless “witness” (1:2, 9; 6:9; 12:11, 17; 20:4) accompanied by “perseverance” (1:9; 2:2, 3, 19; 3:10; 13:10; 14:12) and “faith” (2:10, 13, 19; 13:10; 14:12; 17:14) in God.

They are not to fear ὃ μέλλεις πάσχειν (*ha melleis paschein*, what you are about to suffer). Their “suffering” is imminent and unavoidable. Radl (*EDNT* 2:404) points out that in this book the two categories of μέλλω in the NT epistles are combined: imminent persecution and the anticipation of the eschaton, as “martyrdom is connected with the end” (2:10; 3:10; 6:10–11; cf. 1:9; 8:13; 10:7; 12:4–5; 17:8). Their lot was not a pleasant one, but God assures them that he will be with them. As Jesus said (Mark 10:30 par.) the present rewards of the believers would come “with persecutions.” There

are no promises of an easy life in Scripture. Instead there are promises of divine comfort and blessing in the midst of suffering.

The imminent persecution is now further clarified by imminent imprisonment. John introduces this segment with his characteristic ἰδοῦ (*idou*, behold), a term found twenty-six times in the Apocalypse, six times in the seven letters, where its purpose is to draw attention to a particularly crucial point, here the extent of the suffering awaiting them. The second μέλλει (*mellei*, about to) qualifies the first: the imminent “suffering” is “imprisonment.” Satan is not finished, for “the devil” is “about to throw some[7] of you into prison.” The change of title from “Satan” in 2:9 to ὁ διάβολος (*ho diabolos*, the devil) here is probably for emphasis. This term also means “adversary, slanderer,” and is used often in the LXX to translate Hebrew שָׂטָן (*śāṭān*). In other words, the two are synonymous. By using both “Satan” and “devil,” John emphasizes the fact that he is the “adversary” of God’s people. The imprisonment prophesied here can mean many things. Hemer (1986: 68) follows Ramsay in arguing that the Romans did not use imprisonment as a punishment for criminal activity and describes the three Roman purposes for prison: coercion against recalcitrance, detention pending trial, and detention awaiting execution. Most likely, the second as well as the third are intended. The Christians of Smyrna were facing the real possibility of death in this desperate situation.

The purpose of this was testing: ἵνα πειρασθῆτε (*hina peirasthēte*, that they might be tested; this is virtually synonymous with the infinitive, “to be tested”). The passive tense of the verb allows two implicit subjects: God as the source of the “test” (divine passive) or Satan. The immediate context might favor Satan (the consensus view), but one wonders why in that case it would not be active, “to test them.” The frequent use of divine passives in this book and the implicit hint in the verse that God is controlling the extent of the trial make God as the subject an attractive proposition. Some (e.g., Beckwith 1919: 454) think there may be double meaning. It is Satan’s purpose to “tempt” them to apostatize, but God’s purpose was to “test” their faith (the two aspects of πειράζω). This view has a great deal of merit.

Thus they “will experience affliction” (see 1:9 on “tribulation, affliction”) but it will last only “ten days.” In other words, God will ensure them a manageable time, similar to the promise of 1 Cor. 10:13, “No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it.” Due to ambiguity caused by the limitation of the “tribulation” to ἡμερῶν δέκα (*hēmerōn deka*, for ten days), several theories have been proposed: (1) It is a small but round number, perhaps a Semitism signifying a complete yet brief period of time as in Gen. 24:55; Num. 11:19; Dan. 1:12; Pirke Abot 5.3 (Alford, Lohmeyer, Walvoord, Ladd, Caird, Johnson, Aune); (2) it refers back to the ten-day testing of Daniel in Dan. 1:12–14, therefore to a limited period (Sweet, Prigent, Beasley-Murray, Chilton, Roloff, Lohse, Krodel, Keener, Giesen, Michaels, Beale); (3) while limited, it is also prolonged enough to designate serious persecution (Beckwith, Lenski, Morris, Summers, Mounce); (4) these are ten historical periods of persecution, probably under ten Roman emperors (E. Scott, Newell); (5) this is a literal ten-day period, a brief but severe outbreak of persecution occurring shortly after the epistle appeared (Thomas 1992: 170–71); (6) it is the language of the arena, similar to inscriptions celebrating gladiatorial contests; the games of Smyrna would be especially dangerous times of anti-Christian sentiment, and this could refer to a short period in which the danger of imminent death was great (Hemer 1986: 69–70). Options 4 and 5 are too literal in a book centering on the symbolism of numbers; option 6 is interesting but speculative. The most likely is a combination of the first three,

all of which are closely connected. We cannot know for certain whether Daniel is specifically in mind, but that does provide the closest parallel. The main aspect is the limited yet quite severe duration of time symbolized in “for ten days.”^[8] God is in control and will make certain the period is not too great, but it will be a terrible time nevertheless.

The solution, as throughout the Apocalypse, is “faithful” endurance. As stated above, “faithfulness” is a key characteristic of this book (utilizing both πιστός and πίστις) to characterize the saints in the midst of opposition from the world. It is used first of Jesus (1:5; 3:14; 14:12; 19:11) in his “faithfulness” to his followers and of the “faithful words” of the Apocalypse itself (21:5; 22:6). Then it is applied to the saints in their faithful walk (2:19; 14:12; 17:14), especially to the point of martyrdom (2:10, 13; 13:10). “Faith” in the Book of Revelation is the way we persevere, by putting all our trust in the God who is sovereign over history and will indeed vindicate his people for all their suffering. It does not mean that suffering is not our lot but rather that God will bring victory out of seeming temporary defeat. This is especially poignant here because that suffering is ἄχρι θανάτου (*achri thanatou*, to the point of death). Ἄχρι could have a temporal meaning (“when you die”) or indicate degree or extent (“to the point of death”). As in the parallel 12:11 (“they did not love their lives to the point of death”), a reference to degree fits better in the context. As stated above, the “imprisonment” meant awaiting trial for capital crimes, and the punishment might indeed be death. In the Gospels radical discipleship was defined in terms of death, as seen in Jesus’ classic statement of Mark 8:34, “Deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow me.” The “cross” is more than a metaphor for denying self; it also means the true disciple must be willing to go all the way with Christ, even to death.

The promised reward is the divine “gift”^[9] of τὸν στέφανον τῆς ζωῆς^[10] (*ton stephanon tēs zōēs*, the crown of life). A “gold crown” is mentioned several times in Revelation, signifying honor and authority (4:4 of the 24 elders; 9:7 of the locusts; 14:14 of the “one like a son of man”). The only other place it is used of believers is 3:11, where it is a “crown.” Here and in 3:11 it does not speak of royalty (that would be διάδημα *diadēma*, found in 12:3; 13:1; 19:12) but of a victor’s crown, an athletic and military metaphor linked with the idea of “overcoming” in verse 11. A garland wreath was placed around the head of the victorious athlete at the games (see Metzger 1993: 33). Smyrna was famed for its games, and so this would be a natural metaphor. Hemer (1986: 72–73) mentions six other possible allusions noted by various commentators: the crown given the presiding priest at the Dionysian mysteries; the crown of honor for civil or military prowess; the crown worn by pagan priests, particularly when martyring Christians; the crown worn by city magistrates; the crown worn at feasts; and the “crown of Smyrna,” the skyline of the city as it rose from the seacoast to Mount Pagus. While the “crowns” worn by pagan priests are not likely as an option, the others are indeed viable. In an excellent discussion, Hemer (1986: 73–75) prefers the athletic and city “crown” metaphors as best capturing the idea. In addition, he mentions a “crown” given posthumously to a leading citizen. This fits the death-life antithesis here; the Smyrnans bestow their honor on a corpse, while Jesus uses it to bring “life” out of death. Following Deissmann, he also notes that while earthly kings expected to receive a crown at their visit (“parousia”) to a city, Christ would bestow a “crown of life” at his “parousia.” The major single theme of this letter is that Christ will bring “life” out of “death.” Nothing they could suffer would fail to lead to God’s vindication and their reward. In the book as a whole, as well as in the church of Smyrna, this was a promise especially for those who would pay with their lives.

d. Call to Listen and Challenge to Overcome (2:11)

As already stated in 2:7a, the call to listen challenges the participant in the life of Christ to be willing to obey. Here the negative overtones from the situation in Ephesus are not present, however, for most of the believers in Smyrna were indeed “willing to hear.” They were proving this by their suffering. Therefore, they were indeed “overcomers,” and while they might lose their lives, they would never^[11] experience “the second death.” What was stated positively in 2:10b (that they would be given the “crown of life”) is now stated negatively (that they would never die). The “second death” has its origin perhaps in the OT (cf. Gen. 19:24; Ezek. 38:22, though the phrase is not used) but especially in Judaism (cf. the targums on Deut. 33:6; Jer. 51:39; Isa. 52:14, as well as several references in Philo). Its meaning here is clarified by the other three uses in 20:6, 14; 21:8. It is the “lake of fire,” the final eternal “death” beyond the mere physical death that ends this life. Martyrdom may end this life, but there will be no “second death” for those who “overcome” this world. The use of ἀδικηθῆναι (*adikēthē*, hurt) stresses the limits of the persecution. They might be “hurt” by the first death (martyrdom), but they could not be destroyed by it. Their true “life” was guaranteed by God.

Summary and Contextualization

This is a letter especially for those who are going through hard times. There are two levels at which one can contextualize (apply) the Word of God: at the surface level of the text (here it would apply to persecution) or at the theological underpinning (here it could apply to trials, since persecution is one type of trial; cf. Heb. 12:4–11 or 1 Pet. 1:6–7) (see Osborne 1991: 344–47). This would be valid for both. There are four levels at which persecution can apply in a society like ours where overt persecution seldom occurs: we can identify with the many Christians who are suffering around the world (cf. Rom. 12:15; Heb. 13:3); we can realize that such persecution could happen here in the near future and be ready for it; we can ask ourselves how many compromises we have made in order to avoid any persecution at work or in secular society; and we can endure general trials that draw us away from the world and toward Christ. Any of these can fit this letter. God reminds the “Smyrna” Christians not to allow hard times to discourage them, for “all things work together for good” (Rom. 8:28), and even out of the ultimate persecution God will bring life. We may not see the answers to our prayers until after death (like the heroes of the faith in Heb. 11), but God will indeed vindicate his people. The “synagogue of Satan” will ultimately not be able to harm us. The “crown of life” is guaranteed to all who remain faithful.

Additional Notes

2:8. Hemer (1986: 60–65) provides an extensive but somewhat exaggerated view of the background behind the death-life emphasis here. He points out that Smyrna linked its name with “myrrh,” a term meaning “suffering” and a perfume used often in embalming. For Smyrna this was a reference to the lengthy period when it was simply an aggregation of small villages rather than a major city, and its residents associated themselves with the phoenix, the mythical bird that died and was resurrected (and with which myrrh was also connected). We cannot know how much of this would have been in the mind of John or his readers, but this does provide some interesting parallels.

2:9. As Schüssler Fiorenza (1991: 55) says, labeling the Jews of Smyrna “the synagogue of Satan” is not anti-Semitism, for John shows great appreciation for his Jewish heritage elsewhere. Rather, it is a reflection on the extent Satan has been able to use them to persecute the Christians and a result of their rejection of the true Messiah. Yarbrow Collins (1986: 308–20) states that it is part of the Christian struggle to establish their own identity in light of the great Jewish and Gentile opposition. By “vilifying” their opponents, they discover their own “self-definition.”

2:10. Manuscripts differ as to whether μηδέν (P and several minuscules in addition to some versions and church fathers) or the more grammatically feasible μή (A C and a few minuscules and versions) is preferable. It is more likely, however, that later copyists would smooth out the anomaly of the singular μηδέν followed by the plural ἃ by switching to μή. Therefore, μηδέν is the more likely original reading.

2:10. Apparently, scribes had a great deal of difficulty with the verb “have.” Some took it as another aorist subjunctive, ἔχητε (A P and several minuscules) or ἐξήτε (some minuscules), thus producing “that you might be tested and have affliction.” Most, however, believe that these are affected by proximity to πειρασθῆτε, and that the future ἔξετε (supported by P and a wide variety of minuscules, versions, and church fathers) is more likely in keeping with the “about to suffer” earlier.

2:10. The present imperative γίνου could be equivalent to εἰμί or carry its basic force of “become” or perhaps could mean “prove yourself to be” (Swete, Alford, Thomas). The second is unlikely, since there is no hint of a process here. The third is based more on context than on the meaning of the verb, and the first is probably intended.

3. Letter to Pergamum (2:12–17)

About seventy miles north of Smyrna and fifteen miles inland lay the magnificent city of Pergamum, with a citadel nearly thirteen hundred feet above the plain of the Caicus River and a major city at its base. It became an important city in the third century B.C. (some think the Persians had deliberately refrained from developing it due to its natural military capabilities) when the successors of Alexander the Great turned it into a major military fortress. Lysimachus, king of Thrace, entrusted nine thousand talents, a major portion of his treasury, to the eunuch Philaeterus, who after Lysimachus's defeat in 281 began to establish his own kingdom. For the next one hundred and fifty years Pergamum grew in power under the Attalid dynasty, first as an ally then as a rival of the Seleucids. Attalus I, son of Philaeterus's brother Eumenes I (263–241), reigned from 241 to 197 and was the first to declare himself "king." He allied himself with Rome (against the Seleucids) in the First Macedonian War, and Pergamum became a major power as a vassal of Rome. Their territory often expanded during this period to the Taurus River some three hundred miles away. Attalus III (138–133) at his death bequeathed his kingdom to Rome, and it became the Roman province of Asia. Pergamum's influence waned, however, after it joined Mithridates VI of Pontus in his war against Rome in 89–84 B.C. and executed all its Roman citizens. After Cornelius Sulla's defeat of the coalition, Pergamum went into nearly a century of decline, and Ephesus replaced it as the central city of the region until the reign of Augustus, when Pergamum regained its status.

Its regaining of status was made possible primarily by the architectural innovations of Eumenes II (197–159), who built up the acropolis by adding a circuit wall, the temple of Athena, a great altar to Zeus, and a library that held two hundred thousand volumes. Along with Athens and Alexandria it became a major intellectual center. Eumenes II was directly responsible for popularizing writing sheets made from animal skins that became known as *περγαμηνή* (*pergamēnē*), known today as "parchment" (tradition says it was invented there, but that has been disproven). Therefore, by the first century A.D. Pergamum had become not only an important political center but a major intellectual and religious center as well.

The city also became the leading religious center of Asia. Temples, altars, and shrines were dedicated to Zeus (king of the gods and known there as "savior-god" from the primary titles taken by the Attalid kings), Athena (goddess of victory and patron of the city), Dionysus (patron god of the dynasty, symbolized by a bull), and Asklepios (god of healing, symbolized by a serpent). A huge area of the city and a temple were dedicated to Asklepios and the healing arts. As a result Pergamum became a medical center as well as the Lourdes of its day. The great altar to Zeus, forty feet high, depicting the victory of Attalus I over the Galatians and with a frieze around the base depicting the victory of the Hellenistic gods over the giants of the earth (civilization over paganism), stood on a high terrace at the top of the mountain. In addition, Pergamum was the center of the imperial cult in Asia. It was the first city to be allowed a temple to a living ruler when in A.D. 29 Augustus allowed a temple to be erected to him. There was a great deal of precedent for this. Attalus I called himself "savior," and Eumenes II labeled himself "savior" and "god." A temple with royal priests and priestesses was erected near the palace, and Pergamum three times was named *neōkoros* (temple sweeper or warden of the imperial worship). This honor more than anything else made it the leading city in the province.[1]

Krodel (1989: 114) points out that Christians were persecuted in Pergamum due primarily to the prevailing imperial cult rather than popular cults like Asklepios. Emperor worship was linked to civic loyalty and patriotism. Thus refusal to participate was not only godless but subversive. Christians, due to their rejection of the Roman gods, were called atheists; but they were also accused of “hatred of the human race” because they refused to show political loyalty to the emperor and thus to the Roman people. Moreover, the Jews were tolerated because they represented an ancient nation, while Christians had no national history. The Jewish people were protected and recognized by a Roman treaty. Christianity had no such background and so was labeled a mere “superstition,” all the more hated for its exclusivism and intolerance of the gods.

- a. Address and prophetic messenger formula (2:12)
- b. Situation (2:13)
- c. Weakness (2:14–15)
- d. Solution (2:16)
- e. Call to listen and challenge to overcome (2:17)

Exegesis and Exposition

¹²To the angel of the church at Pergamum, write: “This is what the one who has the sharp double-edged sword says: ¹³I know where you live, where Satan has his throne. You are holding fast my name and have not denied my faith, even in the days of Antipas, who has witnessed and been faithful to me. He was put to death among you, where Satan lives. ¹⁴But I hold a few things against you: There you have some who have grabbed hold of the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to throw a stumbling block before the children of Israel, namely to eat meat sacrificed to idols and to commit immorality. ¹⁵In the same way, you also have those who grab hold of the teaching of the Nicolaitans. ¹⁶Therefore, repent! Otherwise, I am going to come soon and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth. ¹⁷Let the one who has an ear heed what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who overcomes I will give both the hidden manna and a white stone. Upon this stone there will be a new name written that no one knows except the one who receives it.”

a. Address and Prophetic Messenger Formula (2:12)

For the meaning of the address (2:12a), see the discussion of 2:1a. This letter has the simplest description of Christ of any of the seven, containing just one element. The “sharp double-edged sword”^[2] was a symbol of Roman justice. As mentioned in 1:16, this symbol is drawn from Isa. 11:4 and the picture of divine justice there. It is linked with Rev. 2:16 here and thus not only to 1:16 but also to 19:15, 21, with the imagery of the sword of justice “coming out of Christ’s mouth,” referring to his word of judgment. The *ῥομφαία* (*rhomphaia*, sword) was a Thracian broadsword used in cavalry charges; in Roman times it became a symbol of their might. Here it is probably used because the Roman proconsul in charge of the province resided in Pergamum, and the symbol of his total sovereignty over every area of life, especially to execute enemies of the state (called *ius gladii*), was the sword. This tells the church that it is the exalted Christ, not Roman officials, who is the true judge. The ultimate power belongs to God, and nothing the pagans can do will change that.

b. Situation (2:13)

The exalted Christ “knows”^[3] (on this see 2:2, 9) three things: the pagan world in which they live, their faithful witness, and their endurance under persecution. The verb *κατοικεῖς* (*katoikeis*, you dwell) depicts a residence or habitation. They were not merely temporary visitors but had their

home there. The emphasis is on the appositional ὅπου ὁ θρόνος τοῦ Σατανᾶ (*hopou ho thronos tou Satana*, where Satan has his throne). [4] The connectives—ποῦ/ὅπου—are in apposition and state that Pergamum is Satan’s special habitation, his “throne.” In the ancient world a throne signified special authority and royal governance, so in some way Pergamum is named as the seat of satanic power. There have been several interpretations of “Satan’s throne” (from the least likely to the most likely): (1) From a distance the acropolis set on the plateau looks like a throne. This type of geographical metaphor worked for Smyrna, which was called a “crown” by ancient writers; however, no such evidence supports this supposition. (2) The idols, altars, shrines, and temples of Pergamum, as well as its extreme paganism, were tools of Satan. While this is true, it is difficult to think of the city itself as Satan’s throne, for most of the cities named in these chapters were centers of idolatry and paganism. (3) The altar to Zeus Soter on top of the mountain was a magnificent structure that dominated the city. The legs of the giants in the sculpture were serpent’s tails, and such a structure epitomized idolatry and paganism. However, again the worship of Zeus was central to every city. (4) The center of the cult of Asklepios was Pergamum, and the symbol of Asklepios was a serpent, aligned with Satan in 12:9 and 20:2. Members of the cult called Asklepios “savior.” While this is viable (indeed, the last three are possible), it is not as likely as the next option, for Zeus as well as Asklepios was called “savior” and many gods were special to this city (see above). (5) The best option is the imperial cult, the major problem behind Revelation as a whole (as we will see) and the core of Pergamum religion. It was emperor worship that most directly occasioned the persecutions under Domitian and Trajan, and Pergamum was the center of the imperial cult for all of the province of Asia. As Aune (1997: 183–84) says, it is not so much an architectural or local feature that is in mind but rather Roman opposition and persecution of Christians that is central.

The second area of Christ’s “knowledge” centered on the faithfulness of the Pergamum believers. They continued to “hold fast” (present tense κρατεῖς, *krateis*) or remain faithful to τὸ ὄνομά μου (*to onoma mou*, my name). The verb means to “grasp forcibly” or, in this figurative use, to “remain firm.” In 2:1 Jesus “holds the seven stars firm” as he watches over the churches, and here the believers “hold firm” to his name. The “name” (38 times in this book; only Acts uses it more frequently) connotes the essence of the person, and in the LXX as here often speaks of the person’s basic characteristic. For instance, Jesus (see Matt. 1:21, 25 on the name Jesus) gave Simon the name “Cephas/Peter” to designate what he would become, the “rock.” When the believers are given “new names” in 2:17 below, they have a new identity, a new family (cf. 3:5, 12; 14:1; 22:4). Therefore, to remain true to Jesus’ name means to live up to the responsibility of this new identity, to resist the lure of this pagan world.

The negative side of the same phenomenon clarifies this faithfulness further: they have refused to “renounce my faith.” To the present tense “continue to remain firm” is added the past tense “did not renounce” (the Christian faith). Here and in 3:8 (where it is paired with τηρέω, *tēreō*, to keep), the verb ἀρνέομαι (*arneomai*, I deny) has the connotation of perseverance in the face of persecution. Schenk (*EDNT*, 1:154) argues that this probably goes back to the Q saying found in Luke 12:9, “The one who denies me before others will be denied before the angels of God” (my translation). Many (e.g., R. Charles, Caird, P. Hughes, Thomas) believe the switch to the aorist indicates a past time of persecution used here as a model for the imminent persecution to come. The phrase τὴν πίστιν μου (*tēn pistin mou*, my faith) could refer either to “the Christian faith” or to “faith in me,” depending on whether μου is a possessive (“my”) or objective (“in me”) genitive. In the context of the book, where πίστις always refers to an active and persevering trust in Christ (cf.

2:19; 13:10; 14:12) and is equivalent to πιστός (*pistos*, faithful; see the discussion of 1:5 and 2:10 as well as the use of the adjective in the next part of this verse), the latter is more likely (so also Deer 1987: 328–30).

The third area of Christ’s “knowledge” adds further details to the past refusal to “renounce” Christ in the previous phrase. This is introduced by ascensive καί (*kai*, even). We know nothing about “the days of Antipas,” for there is no record. As Mounce (1998: 80) relates, later tradition stated that he had been roasted to death in a brazen bull during the reign of Domitian for standing against (his name means “against all”) paganism. Such allegorizing is unlikely, however, and there is no evidence to substantiate this tradition. More importantly, the description of the exalted Christ from 1:5, “faithful witness,” is applied to him. However, the repetition of μου (*mou*, my) before each element tends to separate them into individual characteristics, “my^[5] witness and faithful one.” The term μάρτυς (*martyr*, witness) did not come to mean “martyr” until the third century, but this book prepared the way for that later connotation by linking “witness” with “put to death” here (cf. Acts 22:20, “the blood of your witness, Stephen”). As stated in the last paragraph, “faithful” here refers to a persevering trust in Christ in the midst of persecution and martyrdom. Apparently, only Antipas had died in the previous persecution, but as at Smyrna (2:10) many more might die (Eusebius later named Carpus, Papyrus, and Agathonike as martyrs in Pergamum).

Finally, this is clarified further as the place ὅπου ὁ Σατανᾶς κατοικεῖ (*hopou ho Satanas katoikei*, where Satan dwells). This frames the verse with the satanic presence at Pergamum. The first part says the city is “where Satan has his throne,” and the second part says it is “where he dwells.” In other words, they live in Satan’s hometown, and this is proven by Antipas’s martyrdom and by the total opposition of the pagan populace and Roman officials to the saints in Pergamum. Satan is the true origin of this hatred.

c. Weakness (2:14–15)

While the Ephesian church was commended for identifying and opposing the Nicolaitan heresy, the church at Pergamum tolerated it and so had to be castigated for their weakness. The introductory formula is much the same as that addressed to Ephesus (2:4) except for the addition of ὀλίγα (*oliga*, a few things).^[6] The purpose here is to heighten the seriousness of the situation. While the Christians were remaining faithful, they were allowing a heretical movement to flourish in their midst, thereby endangering the whole church. Their problem was not external but internal, as seen in ἔχεις ἐκεῖ (*echeis ekei*, you have there), which means “you have in your midst.” The problem is identified^[7] as τὴν διδαχὴν Βαλαάμ (*tēn didachēn Balaam*, the teaching of Balaam). Some members of the congregation (ἐκεῖ is used in a local sense to refer to some people in the church) had apparently fallen into the Nicolaitan cult movement, here described in OT terms as “the teachings of Balaam” (a subjective genitive, “what Balaam taught”).^[8] Balaam was a Gentile prophet consulted by Balak king of Moab in Num. 22–24 to place a curse on the Israelites, but instead Balaam uttered only blessings. There is no record of Balaam advising Balak, but in Num. 25:1–3 the Israelites are described as succumbing to immorality with the pagan women and idolatry in worshiping Baal, and in Num. 31:16 Moses attributed the action of the Moabite women to “Balaam’s advice.” Moreover, Jewish tradition considered Balaam a false teacher (as in Josephus, *Ant.* 4.6.6 §§126–30; cf. SB 3:793). Christ emphasizes this by stating that Balaam “taught” (note the cognate ἐδίδασκεν [*edidasken*, was teaching]^[9] after “teaching”) them how to lead Israel into sin. The language used here (βαλεῖν σκάνδαλον, *balein skandalon*, throw a stumbling block) speaks of

leading a person into apostasy. In Matt. 18:7 the “stumbling block” was temptation to fall away from Christ, and in both Rom. 9:33 and 1 Cor. 1:23 it refers to the rejection of Jesus by the Jews. The cult of Balaam is clearly portrayed as a heresy and its followers as apostates.

The two areas of this “teaching”—idolatry and immorality—relate to practice rather than doctrine, and it is interesting that no mention is made in the letters to Ephesus, Pergamum, or Thyatira of the actual teachings of this movement. Perhaps this is deliberate, because the teachings were not worthy of discussion, or John was not about to give any publicity to these doctrines (so Krodel 1989: 118–19). That is unlikely, however, for several epistles (e.g., Colossians, the Pastorals, 1 John) refute the doctrines of false teachers. More likely the movement centered on praxis more than theory. The description—“eating meat sacrificed to idols” and “commit idolatry”—is reminiscent of Acts 15:20, 29, and the four restrictions placed on Gentile believers by the Jerusalem council. These were always problems among Gentile Christians, raised in an atmosphere of idolatry and immorality. Apparently this cult movement sought accommodation with such pagan practices. The primary aspect was idolatry.^[10] The heretics were apparently teaching that there was nothing wrong with participating in the imperial cult, since even most Romans did it out of civic duty rather than actual worship. Some (Beasley-Murray, Roloff, Sweet, Beale) take this literally and think their sin went no further than eating sacrificial meat (as in 1 Cor. 8–10 or Rom. 14), but the imagery of Balaam and Jezebel is too strong for that. Most likely actual idolatry took place, possibly temple feasts in honor of “Caesar, god and savior.” Johnson (1981: 441) notes the extent to which religious festivals dominated pagan life, for instance the three-day festival to Dionysus in the spring, the procession to Dionysia in March, and the feast to Aphrodite with its immorality in May.

There is also debate on the meaning of πορνείσαι (*porneusai*, to commit immorality). Some (e.g., Caird, Talbert, Beale) believe that this is not actual immorality but a metaphor for idolatry, built on the OT image of Israel as an unfaithful wife “whoring” after other gods (e.g., Isa. 57:3, 8; Hos. 2:2–13). In the Apocalypse “immorality” refers literally to promiscuity in 9:21; 21:8; and 22:15, and metaphorically to idolatry in 2:21; 14:8; 17:2, 4; 18:3, 9, so either is possible. Here and in 2:20, however, it is more likely that literal promiscuity is in view, similar to the libertinism of the heretics in 1 John (see also on 2:6). There is no need for such redundancy as a statement on idolatry followed by an OT metaphor for the same thing. These false teachers were guiding their followers into both idolatry and immorality.

The cult of Balaam in verse 15 is connected to the Nicolaitans from 2:2, 6. The major question here is whether they are the same or separate but similar movements (so MacKay 1973: 111; Coutsoumpos 1997: 24). The key is the connecting adverb οὕτως (*houtōs*, likewise). The language is awkward, with the original “likewise” repeated in the καὶ (*kai*, also) and again in the final ὁμοίως (*homoīōs*, likewise).^[11] Some (e.g., R. Charles) believe that the first “likewise” refers to the cult of Balaam, the second to the Ephesian church from 2:2, 6, and links them all. This is not likely, however, since a reference to Ephesus would be obscure in this context. Others (e.g., Thomas 1992: 193) see 2:14–15 as describing similar but separate movements, on the grounds that the repetition of the adverbs for comparison is too emphatic to be relegated to a single group described two ways in two verses. The best solution is to take this not as a comparison between two similar movements but as a comparison between a single movement (the Nicolaitans) and the Jewish tradition about Balaam: “In the same way that Balaam subverted the Israelites, these false teachers are trying to subvert you.” This is also favored by the repetition of κρατεῖν (*kratein*, to grab hold of) in 2:14–15. The followers of the false teachers have “grabbed hold of the teaching of Balaam” in verse 14 and

have “grabbed hold of the teaching of the Nicolaitans” in verse 15. It is likely that they are one and the same set of “teachings.”

d. Solution (2:16)

As a result (οὖν [oun, therefore] draws a conclusion from v. 14) of their tolerant pluralism, their church was endangered by these unopposed heretics. Their situation was directly opposite that of the Ephesian church, who had triumphed over the Nicolaitans but had forgotten how to “love”; they were faithful but had forgotten how to fight against the enemies of God. Nevertheless, the solution was the same: μετανόησον (*metanoēson*, repent).[12] As discussed in 2:5, the verb means to “change” previous ways, both spiritually and ethically. In this context it means to change their approach and take a strong stance against the false teachers. To fail to do so would constitute sin (“repent” always connotes sin) and invite divine judgment.

The warning also follows the pattern of 2:5. It begins with the idiomatic εἰ δὲ μή (*eide mē*, otherwise), which is elliptical for the more expanded “if you do not repent” in 2:5. The present tense ἔρχομαί σοι (*erchomai soi*, I am going to come to you) is borrowed from 2:5 and, as there, is a futuristic present, with the added ταχύ (*tachy*, soon; not in 2:5) emphasizing the imminence of the “coming” judgment. In accordance with 2:5, this “coming” refers both to a present judgment upon the church and to the final judgment at the “parousia.”

The text now switches from the present tense “come” to the future tense “will fight” (πολεμήσω, *polemēsō*) in order to make explicit the nature of the coming judgment. The verb carries a strong meaning, “to wage war,” and is used five times (the noun occurs nine times) in Revelation both of the dragon’s (and beast’s) “war” against[13] the saints (11:7; 12:17; 13:7) and the Lamb (16:14; 17:14; 19:19) and God’s war against the forces of evil (12:7; 19:11). This is a particularly apocalyptic metaphor, building on the divine warrior theme from the OT as God goes to war against his enemies. By switching from the second-person pronoun σοι (*soi*, to you) to the third-person pronoun αὐτῶν (*autōn*, to them), John stresses that the “coming” will be to the whole church, but the wrath will be especially addressed to the heretics and their followers. Nevertheless, the judgment will be upon the whole church, for undoubtedly if the church had taken a strong stand, there would have been far fewer defections to the Nicolaitan camp. The believers are being given a choice: go to war against the heretics or else God will do so for them but with far more drastic results. This theme will be made more explicit in verses 20–25 (Thyatira, who also has failed to condemn the false teachers).

The means by which this divine judgment will take place is ἐν τῇ ῥομφαίᾳ τοῦ στόματός μου (*en tē rhomphaia tou stomatos mou*, with the sword of my mouth), repeating the image of the “sword” from the description of Christ at the beginning of this letter (2:12). This is also the “double-edged sword” that “came from his mouth” in 1:16 (cf. 19:15, 21). It is generally agreed that this symbolizes the “word of judgment” uttered by Christ (in 19:13 “his name is the Word of God,” and v. 15 builds on that image) against the forces of evil, here the heretics. It has long been recognized that the Pax Romana was a misnomer, since the Roman “peace” was guaranteed with the sword, the symbol of Roman justice. Therefore, this would be a powerful figure of speech in a first-century setting.

e. Call to Listen and Challenge to Overcome (2:17)

As discussed in 2:7a, the call to listen is built on Jesus’ use of this saying in Mark 4:9 and elsewhere, and is a prophetic warning to heed the words of this letter. It is the “Spirit” who is speaking, and

the church ignores these words to their peril. Moreover, to “hear” is to obey, and it is a call to put these exhortations into practice in their church. If the church is willing to listen, they must “repent” (2:16) and begin rebuking the false teachers and their followers.

Those who do so will become “overcomers” (see 2:7b); they will “conquer” through their obedience and perseverance in the terrible persecution they experienced in Pergamum (the external problem, in which they had been successful) and through their faithfulness in opposing the false teachers (the internal problem, in which they thus far had been failures). Those who are victorious in these areas are promised two divine “gifts” (discussed in 2:7b), as seen in the repetition of δῶσω αὐτῷ (*dōsō autō*, I will give to him) before each gift. The first is τοῦ μάννα τοῦ κεκρυμμένου (*tou manna tou kekrymmenou*, the hidden manna).^[14] There are five interpretations of this phrase: (1) The most frequently mentioned (e.g., Beckwith, Caird, Mounce, Beasley-Murray, Johnson) is the connection with the Jewish legend regarding the “hidden manna.” A jar of the manna that fell in the wilderness was placed in the ark (Exod. 16:32–34; cf. Heb. 9:4). Tradition said that at the time of the destruction of Solomon’s temple, Jeremiah (others said an angel) was told by God to take the ark and hide it underground at Mount Sinai (2 Macc. 2:4–7; 2 Bar. 6.7–10; 29.8; Sib. Or. 7.148–49), there to await the eschaton, when the Messiah would place the ark in the new temple. Therefore it is connected to the messianic feast of the end times and refers to the eternal bliss of heaven (Beale, Aune). (2) Connected with this, some (Sweet, Prigent, Krodel, Roloff) also posit a Eucharist motif, since Paul in 1 Cor. 10:3–4 equated the manna with the eucharistic celebration. Both of these are seen as anticipations of the final messianic feast. (3) Others (Walvoord, Morris) interpret this as “celestial” or spiritual food made available to the overcomers (like the “manna” given to Israel in the wilderness) but “hidden” or kept from the rest of the world. (4) Wong (1998b: 348–49) takes the hidden manna to be Christ, stemming from Christ as “the bread of life” (John 6:35) that provides eternal sustenance (John 6:37). This then is hidden from the unsaved and not fully revealed to the saved. (5) R. Charles (1920: 1.65–66) follows a Jewish tradition built on Ps. 78:25, which calls manna “the bread of the angels,” stating that in the messianic kingdom this would become the food of God’s people (2 Bar. 29.8). The Christians of Pergamum are to avoid meat offered to idols in order to get the heavenly manna. (6) Krodel (1989: 120–21) notes that “manna” in a Hellenistic setting could refer to the granules of frankincense used on pagan altars in the imperial cult. In this sense those who refused to participate in emperor worship (Satan’s throne) would be given “heavenly frankincense” when they reigned with Christ in the messianic kingdom.

These options are not mutually exclusive, and several (especially 1, 3, 4) could be part of the meaning. The emphasis on “hidden” definitely favors the first as the primary thrust, but the idea of spiritual food and heavenly manna could well be part of that. A eucharistic connection is not so definite in 1 Cor. 10, let alone here, and the Hellenistic use of “manna” for frankincense seems possible but not as likely as the other three, since it fails to explain the emphasis on “hidden.” Also, the promise is not purely future but probably partakes of the same inaugurated eschatology as much of the rest of the book. As they “overcome” both the pressure of the imperial cult and the false teachers in their midst, the believers will be given spiritual food now as a foretaste of the heavenly manna at the eschaton.

The second promise, that of the “white stone,” is just as elusive as the “hidden manna” and has even more interpretive possibilities. There are two keys to the solution: the further description of the “new name written on it” that no one knows but the recipient; and whether ψῆλον λευκὴν (*psēphon leukēn*, white stone) means a stone, a gem, or even a stone used for voting.^[15] Hemer

(1986: 96–102) provides seven major options: (1) The “stone” could refer to a jewel in an OT sense, either the Jewish tradition that jewels fell with the manna in the wilderness or the stones in the breastplate of the high priest with the names of the tribes written on them. (2) In ancient trials jurors would cast a white or black stone into an urn to vote for acquittal or guilt (cf. Acts 26:10); while no name was written on the stones, the trial setting could make sense in the Pergamene situation. (3) It was common for members of a guild or victors at the games to use stones as a ticket for admission to feasts, and also for free food or entrance to the games. (4) Pagans often had magical amulets with secret “names” (usually one of the gods) on them to protect from evil and bring good luck. If this were the background, the name of God or Christ would be inscribed on the believer’s “stone.” (5) When gladiators were freed from the arena, they were given stones (actually bone tablets) with their name and date of discharge inscribed. (6) The giving of a stone (the same type as in no. 5 above) with a new name inscribed on it was often done for initiates into the cult of Asklepios. (7) There could be a contrast between the permanent nature of a “stone” as a writing surface (often used in antiquity) and the impermanence of parchment, so famed at Pergamum.

It is impossible to know for certain which of these is the best source for the imagery. Scholars have long been divided, favoring, in order of prominence, numbers 3, 2, 4, 5, 6, 1, and 7. The decision is connected to the identification of the “new name.” It could be either the name of Christ or God (cf. 3:12, the “name of God” written on the overcomer; and 19:12, the name written on Christ “that no one knows but he himself”) or a new name given to the believer. In light of the following “that no one knows except the recipient,” a personal name seems slightly better. It is hard to see how the name of God or Christ would be known only by the overcomer; more likely it is a “new name” given to the overcomer by Christ, in line with Isa. 62:2: “You will be called by a new name that the mouth of the Lord will bestow” (cf. 65:15).^[16] In this sense the best background would be a combination of the stone given victors at the games for entrance into a feast and possibly overtones of a vote of acquittal (though the theology is not stressed here). Initiation rites would fit well, but Hemer (1986: 96–102) has disproven the gladiatorial and cult of Asklepios parallels.

In short, the manna and white stone are both eschatological symbols related to the messianic feast at the eschaton but also teaching the spiritual food and new name that God gives to the believer in the present as well.

Summary and Contextualization

The church at Pergamum can be compared to the church today in the midst of the pressures of the secular world, though we have nothing in the Western world comparable to the imperial cult (Satan’s throne), with its rejection and persecution of all things Christian (though many other nations are experiencing this). We do, however, have a secular society that places a great deal of pressure on Christians to compromise and conform (cf. 1 Pet. 4:3–4), and a syncretism similar to that faced by the Christians in Pergamum is taking over Christianity with its rampant materialism. Polls have shown that while evangelicalism is at an all-time high in popularity, it has seldom had less effect on society, and on the whole it is hard to tell the Christians from the non-Christians by their lifestyle and attitudes. Moreover, we have even more false teachers in the church today (most of the cults have originated in church settings), and this is a worldwide problem. Therefore, like Pergamum, most of us live in Satan’s realm and face great pressure to weaken our faith and our walk with Christ. All too often we are guilty of watering down our

Christian theology (all too many Christians are turned off to theology and want only a “feel-good” religion). We must develop teachers and preachers who make theological truth exciting and relevant. We need to “repent” and develop “overcomers” as much as the church at Pergamum did.

Additional Notes

2:13. ἐν ταῖς ἡμέραις Ἀντιπᾶς ὁ μάρτυς μου ὁ πιστός μου: There is a grammatical anomaly in the genitive Ἀντιπᾶς, an indeclinable name, followed by an appositional phrase in the nominative case. Hemer (1986: 85–86, 238 nn. 44–45) points out that such a construction is common in Revelation (e.g., 1:5; 3:12) but later scribes tried to correct this by inserting ἐν ταῖς (🔍) or ἐν αἷ (🔍 [corrector] 025 etc.) after ἡμέραις. Hemer suggests that the final ς in Ἀντιπᾶς may have arisen from dittography with the following ο or by assimilation to the following nominative. Nothing can be proven, and it seems just as likely that we have a genitive followed by a nominative in apposition, a phenomenon that is peculiar to this book.

2:14. τὴν διδαχὴν Βαλαάμ: There is double meaning in the use of “teaching” here. On the one hand, it is used because of the “teaching” of the false teachers at Pergamum. As stated in the discussion of the Nicolaitans in 2:6, it is likely that the Nicolaitans (2:6, 15), the cult of Balaam (2:14), and the followers of Jezebel (2:20–23) are all part of the same movement. On the other hand, as some point out (e.g., Beckwith 1919: 459; Mounce 1998: 80), it is used of the way Balaam “taught” (not a body of doctrine but a strategy) the Midianites how to defeat the Israelites.

4. Letter to Thyatira (2:18–29)

The least important of the seven cities, Thyatira was a commercial town situated on the Lycus River (not the same one as Colosse or Laodicea) forty miles southeast of Pergamum on the road to Sardis. Little was written about the city in ancient sources, and since the modern town of Akhisar is on the site, little archeological excavation has been done. As a result, we know less about it than any of the other cities. It was founded in the third century B.C. as a military outpost by Saleucus I (though a small settlement had probably existed there earlier) in order to have a buffer against his neighbor Lysimachus. Pergamum gained control of Thyatira in 262 B.C., and Rome in 190 B.C. As a strategic town on the frontier, the first century of its life was spent suffering the ravages of conquering forces. While after 190 there were fewer upheavals due to the presence of the Romans, Thyatira was still militarily strategic and so was often unsettled due to local politics.

Until the first century B.C. it had little peace, but when the Pax Romana finally arrived, Thyatira was well situated on trade routes to take advantage of commercial and manufacturing opportunities. At the time of writing, Thyatira was still relatively unknown but on the way to the prosperity it attained in the second and third centuries. The city was especially known for its large number of trade guilds. Most cities in the Greco-Roman world centered on the guilds, but in Thyatira they were especially prominent (most often mentioned in inscriptions were the shoemakers, the makers and sellers of dyed cloth, and the bronze smiths). Hemer (1986: 107–8) believes this was so because throughout its history the trades provided an auxiliary function for the military in Thyatira, a garrison town. Each craftsperson (merchants, tanners, potters, bakers, wool and linen workers, sellers of cloth, various metalworkers, etc.) was part of a “guild,” and though they were not obligatory, few workers failed to belong, for the guilds were centers of social life as well as commerce. In fact, both physically and sociologically, the guilds were at the heart of civic life. Towns tended to be laid out in squares, and each guild controlled its portion of “squares.” Lydia, a “seller of purple” and possibly a patron of the church at Philippi (Acts 16:12–15), was from Thyatira, which was well known for its dyes. The religious life of Thyatira was also influenced by the guilds. Each guild had its own patron god or goddess, and the frequent feasts of the guilds were religious in character. The pressure on Christians to participate in the idolatrous life of the people was probably linked to the guilds, for their feasts were the heart of the social (and commercial) life of the city. To refuse to participate meant the loss of both goodwill and business.

The primary god worshiped in Thyatira was Apollo, the sun god and son of Zeus (connected there with the Lydian sun god Tyrinnos). There was little if any emperor worship (though some surmise it because Apollo was also the patron god of the emperor, who was also viewed as a “son of Zeus”). The population was mixed, with several different nationalities. Though we have little record of a Jewish presence, that Lydia was a “God-fearer” (Acts 16:14) may point to a small Jewish population in Thyatira (if she was converted there). Much of the worship was connected either to the temple of Apollo (there was also a temple to Artemis and a shrine to Sambathe, one of the Sibyls) or to the guilds.[1]

a. Address and messenger formula (2:18)

- b. Strengths (2:19)
- c. Weaknesses (2:20–23)
 - i. Tolerance for the heretic (2:20)
 - ii. Opportunity to repent (2:21)
 - iii. Judgment oracle (2:22–23a)
 - iv. Warning to the churches (2:23b)
- d. Further words for the faithful (2:24–25)
- e. Challenge to overcome and call to listen (2:26–29)

Exegesis and Exposition

¹⁸To the angel of the church in Thyatira, write: “This is what the Son of God, whose eyes are like a raging fire and his feet like polished bronze, says: ¹⁹I know your works, namely your love, faith, service, and endurance. Indeed, your last works are greater than the first. ²⁰But I hold this against you, that you tolerate the woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess. She deceives and teaches my slaves to commit adultery and eat meat sacrificed to idols. ²¹I have given her time to repent, but she is not willing to repent from her immorality. ²²Behold, I am going to cast her on a sickbed, and those who commit adultery with her into great affliction, unless they repent of her works. ²³I will strike her children dead. Then all the churches will know that I am one who searches the feelings and the thoughts, and I will repay each one of you according to your works. ²⁴But as for the rest of you in Thyatira, namely those who do not hold to this teaching, who do not know the deep things of Satan as they say, I am not going to place any other burden on you, ²⁵except that you hold fast to what you have until I come. ²⁶As for the one who overcomes and keeps my works until the end,

²⁷I will give them power over the nations;

²⁸and they will destroy them with a rod of iron
and shatter them like potter’s vessels.

²⁹Let the one who has an ear heed what the Spirit says to the churches.”

a. Address and Messenger Formula (2:18)

Once more, the guardian angel of the city is addressed on behalf of the whole church, undoubtedly to help the church realize how important the issues were. This is the same basic introductory formula as 2:1, 8, 12, except the opening participle is replaced by the title ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ θεοῦ (*ho huios tou theou*, the Son of God). This is the only place in this book where the “Son of God” title is used (although the unique filial relationship between the Father and the Son is stressed in 1:6; 2:27; 3:5; etc.), and the reason most likely lies in the centrality of Apollo, son of Zeus, in Thyatira. It is Jesus, not Apollo, who is the true Son of God (this also accounts for the quotation of Ps. 2:9 in Rev. 2:27). A frequent title in the Gospel of John (1:34; 3:18; 5:25; etc.), it connotes majesty and divinity and is an important message to this weak church to center on the true “Son of God.”

The next two descriptions (eyes like a raging fire, feet like polished bronze) are taken from the initial vision of Rev. 1:14–15, where they allude to Dan. 10:6. Yet they also have special relevance to Thyatira, especially the “polished bronze,” which refers to one of the major guilds of the town. As stated in Rev. 1:14–15, the “eyes like a raging fire” portray the penetrating insight and judgment of Jesus. Duff (1997: 117–21) believes that the “fiery eyes” of Jesus stems from the image in the ancient world of the “fiery-eyed” deity who heaps judgment on his enemies. This certainly fits the image here,^[2] though Dan. 10:6 is the primary source. In the desperate situation of Thyatira, with the cult movement of Jezebel running rampant in the church, they need to realize that the exalted Christ is not only aware of every aspect of the situation, but that judgment is imminent. While many members of the church may be fooled by her pernicious arguments, Jesus sees through every one, and the “raging fire” will soon sweep them away (see vv. 22–23). As discussed at 1:15,

the “polished bronze” (see Hemer 1986: 111–17) was an alloy of copper and zinc, a purer and more refined type of brass manufactured by the local guild for the military at Thyatira. As such there is likely a further opposition to the local patron god Apollo, pictured often there as a warrior god astride a horse and wielding a double-bladed battle-ax. It is Jesus who is the true divine warrior, and his power is soon to be felt by the church.

b. Strengths (2:19)

Following the formulaic “I know your deeds” (2:2; 3:1, 8), four “works” are spelled out, linked together by a single σου (*sou*, your) at the end of the four to show that together they constitute the “works.” It is interesting that two churches with serious problems (Ephesus and Thyatira) also have the most extensive list of good “works.” Throughout the NT, whenever a serious exhortation is given, it is anchored in positive encouragement (e.g., the use of “beloved” in the Epistles). Some (Swete, Beckwith, R. Charles, Mounce, Thomas) think they should be seen as two pairs, with the first two the motivating force (love and faith) and the last two the results that follow (service and endurance).^[3] While this is indeed viable, it is more likely that each is to be taken separately (there is no linguistic hint of two pairs, as καὶ τήν [*kai tēn*, and the]^[4] occurs before each of the four).

As often in the NT (though Paul often reverses the two, as in 1 Thess. 5:8; 1 Tim. 1:14; 2:15), “love” has pride of place. Contrary to Ephesus (Rev. 2:4), Thyatira is a loving church, and again it is likely that this is both love of God and of others. It is interesting that the only two occurrences of ἀγάπη (*agapē*, love) in the whole book are in 2:4, 19; the contrast between Ephesus and Thyatira is emphatic. Three of the four times the verb ἀγαπάω (*agapaō*) is used (1:5; 3:9; 20:9), it speaks of divine love, and the fourth (12:11) of the willing sacrifice of the martyrs (“they did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death”).

Love is indeed a primary characteristic of those who would call themselves the children of God. “Faith” (πίστιν, *pistin*) is even more central to this book (see on 2:13), describing not only trust in God rather than in this world but even more a faithful perseverance in the midst of oppression and pressure from the pagans. While Sweet (1979: 94) argues for “faithfulness” here and Thomas (1992: 212) for “faith/belief,” it is more likely that the two aspects shade into one another. In the parallel 2:13, both terms are found and clarify each other. “Service” (διακονίαν, *diakonian*) occurs only here in the book and refers to an active life of care and help, to charitable service and ministry to others. As Weiser (*EDNT* 1:302) points out, the διακονέω (*diakoneō*, serve) word group differs from the δουλεύω (*douleuō*, serve) word group in that the former connotes “service” on behalf of someone while the latter speaks of “service” under or subordinate to someone (the “lord” or “master”). “Endurance” (ὑπομονήν, *hypomonēn*) is another major term in the book (see on 1:9; 2:2, 3), referring to an active perseverance in the midst of pressure and hard times. It is the key characteristic of the “overcomer” who remains true to God even if it means martyrdom. These four describe a life of Christian caring for others and faithfulness to God.

Again contrary to the Ephesians, the quality of life in this church was not diminishing. They were continuing to grow in their good deeds, for “your last works are greater than the first.”^[5] Most likely, this is intended both quantitatively and qualitatively: There were more good deeds and they had more impact than when Thyatira was a young church. This is high praise indeed.

c. Weaknesses (2:20–23)

As great as their strengths were, however, their weaknesses were even more severe. Like

Pergamum they had grown lax in their theological vigilance and had been tolerating the very heresy that Ephesus had rejected. As elsewhere (2:4, 14), the basic formula, “but I have this against you,” introduces divine displeasure at a serious problem in the church and warns of coming judgment if the situation does not change.

i. Tolerance for the Heretic (2:20)

The exalted Christ uses a stronger verb here than with Pergamum. There the church “had” (ἔξεις, *exeis*) false teachers among them; here they “tolerate” (ἀλείς, *apheis*) the leader “Jezebel.” The verb ἀλίνμι (*aphiēmi*) has a wide diversity of meanings (“let go,” “leave,” “pardon,” “forgive”) but in a context like this means “allow,” “permit,” or “tolerate.” It may well connote support as well as tolerance and at the very least an unwillingness to take an active stand against this pernicious teaching. While 2:14–15 considered the Nicolaitan movement as a whole at Pergamum, here the comments single out the leader of the group at Thyatira, denoted by the code name “Jezebel.” The reason for this is obvious. Jezebel was the Phoenician wife of Ahab who programmatically led the northern kingdom into Baal worship and sorcery (1 Kings 16:31–34; 21:25–26; 2 Kings 9:22). While immorality is not mentioned in the OT text (the “harlotry” of 2 Kings 9:22 is probably meant spiritually of idolatry rather than literally), Baal worship normally was quite licentious, so the parallels are close. This leader was a “woman” (γυνᾱίκα, *gynaika*) who “called herself a prophet.” In other words, she claimed that her teaching was a direct message from God. It is possible that this means her teaching was not systematic or formal but took the form of oracles and pronouncements. The gift of prophecy was essential to the early church, and prophets were numbered among the leaders (Eph. 4:11; 1 Cor. 12:28). Women were allowed to prophesy (1 Cor. 11:5) and were counted among the prophets (Acts 21:9). At the same time, there were many false prophets in the OT (Jezebel herself had approximately nine hundred [1 Kings 18:19]).

On the whole, no definitive identification of this woman has ever been made, although several tentative suggestions have been proposed. On the basis of a textual variant, some (Beckwith 1919: 466) have identified her as “your wife Jezebel,” namely the wife of the leader of the Thyatiran church. However, both the reading and the possibility are unlikely (see additional notes below). Others have suggested it was Lydia, the seller of purple cloth who was from Thyatira, because she would have the business background to understand the economic pressure that led to this movement. However, that is too flimsy a reason to make such an identification. Some (Alford) have therefore taken “Jezebel” as a purely symbolic reference to the movement as a whole rather than to a person, but the language here more likely points to a particular leader. Several (Schürer 1893: 153–54 [in Hemer 1986: 117]; Keener 1993: 772; Court 1979: 34) have argued for the Sibyl Sambathe, who had a shrine outside the city. She would then be a pagan prophetess who had great influence due to a developing syncretism in the Thyatiran church. There is evidence that some Jewish thinkers had borrowed the Sibylline oracular style, and that could have influenced the Nicolaitan movement in Thyatira, again from a syncretistic direction. While this is intriguing, Hemer (1986: 117–19) has shown that the data are open to question. The Sibylline origin of Jezebel cannot be more than an interesting possibility. In conclusion, no positive identification for “Jezebel” can be made. All we can speculate is that she was a woman whose prophetic utterances made her the leader of the movement (most likely Nicolaitan, as at Ephesus and Pergamum) at Thyatira, though deSilva (1992: 294) believes that Jezebel was probably a prominent woman who opened her home to the Nicolaitan prophets and supported them.^[6]

One thing we can state with a sense of confidence: the problem in Thyatira centered on the

guilds. For persons to maintain their livelihood, some connection, indeed membership, in the guilds was a virtual necessity. For Christians the problem was that this mandated participation in the guild feasts, which themselves involved “meat offered to idols” (εἰδωλόθυτα, *eidōlothyta*), since the patron gods of the guilds were always worshiped at the feasts. Witherington (1993: 250) says that εἰδωλόθυτα refers to eating meat in pagan temples and religious celebrations like guild feasts. At times this could also involve immorality (πορνεῦσαι, *porneusai*, commit adultery). The extent to which these feasts degenerated into debauchery is questionable, and many have argued that “commit adultery” here is an OT metaphor for idolatry.^[7] For the same reasons as stated in 2:14, however, it is more likely a reference to immoral practices (though the noun form in 2:21 probably does have this figurative meaning). Whenever Christians refused to participate in the feasts because such participation would compromise their faith, they faced the anger of the pagan populace, and it had economic repercussions if they lost their jobs. Thus while at Pergamum it was a life-threatening situation, at Thyatira the problem was more economic and social. Jezebel probably “taught” that there was nothing wrong with a Christian taking part in the guild feasts and celebrations, for it was merely civil. Since idols were nothing, Christians would not destroy their faith by participating. It is also possible that she used some form of Pauline teaching on Christian liberty similar to 1 Cor. 8:4–8, “We know that an idol is nothing at all in the world and that there is no God but one. . . . But food does not bring us near to God; we are no worse if we do not eat, and no better if we do.” In other words, the Christian is free to eat meat offered to idols.

The reply of the exalted Christ is emphatic. In her teaching “Jezebel” πλανᾷ τοὺς ἐμοὺς δούλους (*plana tous emous doulous*, deceives my slaves; on δούλος see 11:18). The verb πλανᾷ is important in the book, used elsewhere of Satan (12:9; 20:3, 8, 10), the false prophet (13:14; 19:20), or the harlot Babylon (18:23) “deceiving” the world into idolatry and immorality. This is the only place in the book where Christians are “deceived”; elsewhere it is always unbelievers. It is possible that those who fall into this “error” are considered thereby to be unbelievers, but the use of “my slaves” makes that unlikely. The verb means to “seduce” a person into sin by leading that one into error. Braun (*TDNT* 6:238–49) notes three characteristics in Jewish and Christian apocalyptic passages: seduction by evil powers (e.g., the angel of darkness), dualism (light vs. darkness, truth vs. error), and eschatology (the false prophets claim to be the deliverers of the last day). There is a close connection between Revelation and the Olivet discourse in this, as Jesus prophesied of “false prophets” and “false messiahs” who would “deceive” many in the church (Mark 13:5–6, 22; Matt. 24:4–5, 11, 24). Jezebel is seen as a satanic force (this is the only place in the book a person wields this terrible power) claiming the Spirit’s authority (as a prophetess) but leading many of God’s^[8] “slaves” astray into heresy.

ii. Opportunity to Repent (2:21)

Elsewhere (2:7, 17, 26, 28), God’s “gift” is eschatological and relates to future (always in the future tense) reward for those who “overcome.” Here the “gift” is past (ἔδωκα, *edōka*) and relates not to reward but to a chance to “repent.” Due to the seriousness of the error, the only thing God can give them is the opportunity to “change” their ways (the meaning of “repentance”; see 2:5). However, the “time” (χρόνον, *chronon*)^[9] for that is almost up, and judgment is imminent (2:22–23). It is likely that John or some other leader had already warned Jezebel (she alone is mentioned here, but the whole movement is addressed through her), either by prophetic utterance or in accordance with 3 John 10, “If I come, I will call attention to what he is doing.” In 1 Cor. 14:29, 32 (cf. 1 John 4:1) the leaders were to “test” prophetic utterances to determine which were from God.

Jezebel failed the test but was “not willing” (οὐ θέλει, *ou thelei*) to repent, with the present tense referring to ongoing attempts to help her get right with God. Unlike 2:14, 20, here πορνεία (*porneia*, adultery) is metaphorical, following the OT tendency (cf. Isa. 57:3, 8; Hos. 9:1) to use it for “playing the harlot” with other gods. Since it is by itself, it functions as a summary term reflecting both sins of verse 20 (idolatry and immorality). Jezebel’s willingness to participate in pagan religious practices was to “commit adultery” against God.

iii. Judgment Oracle (2:22–23a)

This section contains everything that judgment oracles had in the OT except the formula “woe to.” Pergamum was given a warning (“otherwise”), but for Thyatira the coming judgment is announced as a fact (ἰδοὺ, *idou*, behold). She had debauched herself with pagan gods on a bed of idolatry, so now God would “cast” (βάλλω, *ballō*)[10] her onto a different kind of “bed,” a bed of pain. The imagery of “cast into” means that Christ would inflict this suffering on her. The use of illness for judgment was common in the Bible. Job’s friends assumed that his suffering was a result of sin, and in 1 Cor. 11:30 both illness and death resulted from “unworthy” participation in the eucharistic celebration (cf. 1 Cor. 11:27–29). There are three possibilities for the meaning of κλίνη (*klinē*): it could be a funeral bier in accordance with the death of her followers later in the passage (Hort 1908: 30), a dining couch of the type used at guild feasts (Ramsay 1904: 351–52), or a bed of sickness and pain (R. Charles, Swete, Beckwith, Hemer, Chilton, Giesen, Aune). This last is the most likely, for “bed” was often used as a metaphor for serious illness (Exod. 21:18; Ps. 6:6; 41:3). On the grounds that this is too mild a punishment, however, others (Lenski, Thomas) take this as figurative of severe tribulation, namely final judgment at the parousia, in accordance with the judgment meted out upon Jezebel’s followers in the next statement. Either of these last two is viable, but I prefer to take this as present judgment rather than final judgment and so see it as a bed of sickness. This is in accordance with the “delivery to Satan” judgment of excommunication pronounced by Paul in 1 Cor. 5:5 and 1 Tim. 1:20. As there, the purpose is to allow this leader to taste the bitter fruits of her folly.

There is a debate as to whether there are one or two other groups in her entourage. Some (e.g., Beasley-Murray 1978: 91; Thomas 1992: 222) believe that the “adulterers” of Rev. 2:22 and the “children” of 2:23 are the same group, looked at in terms of participation in her sins (adulterers) and acceptance of her teachings (children). This is certainly viable, but it is better to take them as separate groups. At the end of 2:22 there is a further chance for repentance for the adulterers: “unless they repent of her ways.” However, there does not seem to be that chance for the others: “I will strike her children dead.” Therefore, “those who commit adultery with her” (τοὺς μοιχεύοντας μετ’ αὐτῆς, *tous moicheuontas met’ autēs*)[11] are those church members who have been drawn into her syncretistic teaching and practices but have not yet gone as far as she, that is, they have not as yet been “unwilling” to repent and so here are being given the same chance she had. It is possible (so Beckwith, Alford, Thomas) that “with her” refers more to their indirect tolerance of her teaching or their following her example than to their direct participation with her in those sins (direct participation often has the object in the accusative case). In other words, these people were being drawn into her circle but had not yet become full members.

They are warned here that God will visit them with θλίψιν μεγάλην (*thlipsin megalēn*, great tribulation). This borrows the verb from the first part of the verse; Christ will “cast them into” this terrible affliction in the same way he cast Jezebel into sickness. This “great tribulation” is hardly technical for the period in chapters 6–16 of the final eschatological war (contra Sweet 1979: 95) but

rather refers to a terrible time of “affliction” that Christ would visit upon them.^[12] This is more general than the “sickbed” visited upon Jezebel and could include several kinds of trial intended to bring them to repentance. This purpose is made specific in the ἐὰν μὴ μετανοήσωσιν (*ean mē metanoēsōsin*, unless they repent), with the aorist referring either to a specific act of repentance (punctiliar force) or more likely to an ongoing repentance (global force). Jezebel and “her children” (2:23) have already been offered this chance and refused; now these partial followers are being given their opportunity. The key is that this repentance must be ἐκ τῶν ἔργων αὐτῆς (*ek tōn ergōn autēs*, from her works). The sin is still primarily Jezebel’s, and the deeds stem from her evil influence. This does not mean that they are not guilty but rather that they are following her lead. Jezebel introduced the abominable practices and talked them into following her. This is further evidence that they are a separate group from her “children” in 2:23.

The third group (after Jezebel and the “adulterers” in 2:22) comprises τὰ τέκνα αὐτῆς (*ta tekna autēs*, her children). These are most likely not her physical children (contra Beckwith 1919: 467, who says they were the result of her “adultery”) but rather her spiritual “children,” namely those totally committed to her teaching. While there could be a link with the children of Ahab, who were killed in 2 Kings 10:7 (cf. the child of David and Bathsheba in 2 Sam. 12:14), a closer parallel linguistically to ἀποκτενῶ ἐν θανάτῳ (*apoktenō en thanatō*, kill with death)^[13] here is found in Ezek. 33:27 LXX, where part of the judgment on Israel was that many would “die with a plague.” The same form is also found in Rev. 6:8, where the “pale horse” and its rider, “Death,” are given power to “kill by . . . plague.” There is a distinct progression in the punishment meted out to Jezebel and her followers—the sickbed to great suffering to death by plague—though it is possible also to see an ABA pattern, with those who are completely controlled by the heresy (Jezebel and her children) facing a strict judgment of sickness and death, while those who have not yet been totally converted face “great suffering” only if they too refuse to repent.

iv. Warning to the Churches (2:23b)

In characteristic fashion, the Semitic string of καί (*kai*, and) clauses continues, tying 2:22–23 together into a single unit. Christ now turns from the Thyatira church and the followers of Jezebel to address the readers in language reminiscent of the call to listen (“what the Spirit says to the churches,” 2:7, 11, 17, 29). But here the language is stronger. Christ is pouring out his judgment so that γνῶσονται πᾶσαι αἱ ἐκκλησίαι (*gnōsontai pasai hai ekklesiāi*, all the churches will know). The result of Christ’s activity against the cult movement is that “all churches” will be warned by “knowing” of his power in judgment. In the future they will see the hand of the Lord fall upon these evildoers, and at that time they “will know” that there is no escape. This is the only proper response after two consecutive churches have allowed false teachers in their midst. This cannot be allowed, and it is time for the other churches to “realize” the seriousness of the issue. In 1 Tim. 5:20 Paul instructs, “Those who sin are to be rebuked publicly, so that the others may take warning.” That is the principle behind this as well.

God wants the churches to know ὅτι ἐγώ εἰμι ὁ ἐραυνῶν νεφροῦς καὶ καρδίας (*hoti egō eimi ho eraunōn nephrous kai kardias*, that I am the one who searches the feelings and the thoughts). When Christ “searches” a person, he makes a critical investigation that lays bare the deepest part of a person’s being. The language is reminiscent of Jer. 17:10, “I the LORD search the heart and examine the mind.” The νεφρός is literally the “kidney,” in Hebrew thought the core of emotions and feelings. The καρδιά is the seat of the intellect and mind. Together they constitute one’s inner being. Nothing can be hidden from the inquiry of the Lord. Therefore, “all churches” had better

examine their own house, lest the same judgment befall them, for they will not get away with their sins.

Finally, God turns to the church as a whole and reiterates his future “gift” (see 2:7, 10, and below at 2:28), but this time it is in the context of judgment rather than reward. This means God will “repay” them for what they have done, whether good or bad. “Each” (ἐκάστῳ, *hekastō*) of the members would receive reward (or punishment) κατὰ τὰ ἔργα ὑμῶν^[14] (*kata ta erga hymōn*, according to your works). This is the Roman (and OT) legal principle of *lex talionis* (law of retribution), which means that each person receives judgment on the basis of what each has done. It is at the heart of this book. This is also a critical biblical theme, beginning with the OT (Ps. 62:12; Prov. 24:12; Hos. 12:2) and reiterated by Christ (Matt. 16:27), Paul (Rom. 2:6; 14:12; 2 Cor. 11:15; 2 Tim. 4:14), and Peter (1 Pet. 1:17). In the Apocalypse this theme appears in 2:23; 14:13; 18:6; 20:12, 13; 22:12. It is perhaps stated best in 1 Pet. 1:17: we have a Father who does not play favorites but judges each one by his or her works. In this context ἔργα refers both to the outward acts and to the inward thoughts. McIlraith (1999: 514–18) notes an allusion here to Jer. 17:10 and Ps. 16:12, so that the ἔργα are the proper covenant responsibilities expected of God’s people. In this context he sees them as the “first works” of 2:19—love, faith, service, and perseverance. Nothing we do or think will get by the Lord, and he will reward or judge us accordingly.

d. Further Words for the Faithful (2:24–25)

In contrast to (adversative δέ, *de*, but) the cult, the faithful believers are promised they would receive “no other burden.” First, however, they are described in contradistinction to the three groups judged in 2:22–23. They are ὑμῖν . . . τοῖς λοιποῖς (*hymin . . . tois loipois*, the rest of you), with the emphasis (by word order) on ὑμῖν. The “you” who have remained true to the Lord have two distinguishing characteristics: a refusal to succumb to the false teaching and a rejection of the Satan-inspired “deep things” of the cult movement.^[15] First, οὐκ ἔχουσιν (*ouk echousin*, they do not hold) means to reject or refuse to accept “this teaching.” While they have tolerated the movement, the majority still do not accept (note the present tense) its precepts. Second, they have never “known” (note the switch to the aorist tense, ἔγνωσαν, *egnōsan*) or adhered to this movement. The verb can mean “know by experience” or more simply to “perceive,” “understand,” or “believe” a set of teachings. Its meaning here is determined by the decision regarding τὰ βαθέα τοῦ Σατανᾶ (*ta bathea tou Satana*, the deep things of Satan). There are two options: (1) It might be a sarcastic comment on Jezebel’s claim to “know the deep things of God” (cf. 1 Cor. 2:10): they are actually “the deep things of Satan” (so Prigent, Hemer, Ford, P. Hughes, Roloff, Beale). Her prophetic utterances come not from God but Satan. (2) It could be meant literally (so Beckwith, Farrer, Morris, Johnson, Chilton, Krodel, Talbert). On the basis perhaps of protognostic principles, Jezebel may have taught that Christians should experience “the deep things of Satan” in order to triumph over them. In this sense, she would admit that the guild feasts and pagan environment are evil but claim that they have no power over the believer. She would even have taught that Christians should participate in those activities and experience the “depths” of paganism in order to show their mastery over it. The first is more likely, as seen in the parallel with 2:9, where the Jewish opponents are called “the synagogue of Satan.” Interestingly, both solutions have been linked with gnostic teaching. In the first sense, “the deep things of God” would be the esoteric gnosis of proto-Gnosticism. In the second sense, this would be a group of gnostic libertines like those combated in 1 John (cf. 1:8–10; 3:9) who believed that their participation in sinful activities did not become sin because of their “knowledge.” It is difficult to decide which option is correct,

and with the absence of hard data some (e.g., R. Charles 1920: 1.73; Caird 1966: 44–45) are content to leave the matter open. But it is better to make a choice, however tentative; according to Hemer (1986: 122), “It is easier to suppose the opposition got their acceptance in the church if their stated claim was to know ‘the deep things of God.’” In this sense “have not known” means “have not believed” or “accepted” their claims.

It is also difficult to interpret ὥς λέγουσιν (*hōs legousin*, as they say). Does this refer back to the “deep things of Satan” or forward to “no other burden”? Most assume it refers back, but it could be a reference to the apostle’s creed in Acts 15:28 (thus, “As the apostles said, ‘I will put no other burden on you’”; so Hort 1908: 32; Walvoord 1966: 76). While that is possible, it is more likely a reference back, for there is no hint in the context of apostolic teaching. The members of this abhorrent movement have made certain claims, but Christ wants to emphasize (by placing this last) that there is absolutely no truth in these teachings. While they claim to have God’s deep truths, it is actually Satan’s they propound.

For the believers (in contrast to the cult members), there is “no other burden.” Again, there are several options: (1) The language, οὐ βάλλω ἐπ’ ὑμᾶς ἄλλο βάρος (*ou ballō eph’ hymas allo baros*, I lay no other burden on you), seems to be a paraphrase of Acts 15:28–29, although the wording is not exact (“not to lay a greater burden on you”). Both meat offered to idols and adultery are part of the Jerusalem decree as well as here (see R. Charles, Ladd, Hemer, Chilton, Beale). In this sense, God would be placing “no other burden” on them than abstention from adultery and meat offered to idols. Yet one must wonder what the “no other burden” might be—the other two elements of the apostolic decree, abstaining from blood and the meat of strangled animals? There are ambiguities here. (2) The “burden” could be the traditional instructions they received at baptism (Beasley-Murray, Krodel), but there is no contextual indication of such. (3) It could be “no other threat of punishment” (Roloff 1993: 55), in other words, that no more judgment will fall on them but that prophesied against the heretics. This is viable because βάλλω (*ballō*, I throw, lay) is the same verb used in 2:22–23 of “casting” Jezebel and her followers into judgment. (4) It could point forward (to 2:25) rather than backward (Beckwith, Mounce, Thomas, Giesen), thus “no other burden” than remaining faithful to the Lord. Either of the last two makes sense, but the last is probably best in the context. The term βάρος (*baros*) means “weight, burden,” and in this sense could refer either to a difficult task or a “weighty” matter (of the six occurrences in the NT, nearly all utilize a figurative meaning). However, it is unlikely that this means they do not have to oppose the false movement directly (as Thomas says), for that is the one thing Ephesus did right, and opposition to the heretics is implicit in both the letter to Pergamum and the one to Thyatira.

Πλὴν (*plēn*) followed by either ὅτι (*hoti*, that) or the genitive can mean “except that.” Here in 2:25 it is followed by a regular verbal clause, so BDF (§449) considers it a conjunction, “however, in any case.” Beckwith (1919: 470) has the best solution, showing that a negated ἄλλος is sometimes followed by πλὴν to mean “no other . . . than.” The Lord will impose “no other burden” on them “than” to persevere until he returns. The aorist imperative κρατήσατε (*kratēsate*, hold fast) is often used in a global sense to command perseverance as a way of life. As von der Osten-Sacken (*EDNT* 2:314–15) says, this verb frequently connotes “keeping a firm grip” on the traditional truths of the faith (Mark 7:3; 2 Thess. 2:15; Col. 2:19). This is especially so in the letters to the churches (Rev. 2:13; 3:11). In 2:14–15 κρατέω was used of the heretics who “hold firm” to the teachings of Balaam and the Nicolaitans. Therefore, ὃ ἔχετε (*ho echete*, what you have) refers to the body of accepted Christian doctrine in contradistinction from the heretical teachings they must oppose. In short, the true believers in Thyatira are commanded by the Lord to maintain a firm grip on the

truths of the faith against the false teachings of Jezebel and the other Nicolaitans.

This faithfulness to traditional truths and opposition against falsehood is to be maintained “until I come.” The language used (ἄχρι[ς] οὗ ἄν, *achri[s] hou an*, with the aorist subjunctive) occurs only here in the NT, though ἄχρι with οὗ is frequent and with ἄν appears in Gal. 3:19. There is no special thrust, for it means simply “up to the time when I return.” Once again, the key message of the book is perseverance “to the end.” The verb ἤκω (*hēkō*, I come) is probably used here and in 3:3 rather than ἔρχομαι (*erchomai*, I come) because of its strong religious content of a solemn “coming of the deity” (BAGD 344) in salvation or judgment (cf. Matt. 8:11; 24:14; 2 Pet. 3:10).

e. Challenge to Overcome and Call to Listen (2:26–29)

John reverses his practice thus far in the seven letters and places the call to listen last (cf. 2:7, 11, 17), probably due to the lengthy challenge to overcome (2:26–28) and its close connection to the command of 2:25. This is a complex passage, containing both a clarification of the meaning of “overcome” (2:26a) and a twofold promise (2:26b–28). The promise begins similarly to 2:7 and 2:17 with the promise of eschatological gifts to “the overcomer.”^[16] Yet here the meaning is further clarified by the added note “and^[17] keeps my works to the end.” This establishes an ABA pattern in 2:25–26: hold firm until I come—overcome—keep my works to the end. The only way to be a conqueror is to persevere in Jesus’ words (v. 25) and works (v. 26) until the eschaton. There is similar meaning in κρατέω (*krateō*, hold firm, v. 25) and τηρέω (*tēreō*, keep, v. 26). The latter also frequently connotes a person who obeys and guards divine truths. Here it is Jesus’ “works,” with an implied contrast between his “works” here and both Jezebel’s “works” in 2:22 and the “works” of all Christians in 2:23. It is only Christ’s deeds that can be the basis for Christian victory. The evil deeds of a Jezebel or the incomplete deeds of the individual Christian are insufficient. Moreover, Jesus’ words (2:25) must be lived out in deeds (2:26). Belief necessarily leads to action. The “works” themselves are spelled out in 2:19—love, faith, service, endurance. The Thyatirans have lived these in the past and now must exemplify them even more. Finally, both verses end at the eschaton. Jesus’ “coming” (v. 25) is the “end” (v. 26). As in Mark 13:13 (par. Matt. 10:22; 24:13), “The one who endures to the end will be saved.”

The two promises to the final overcomer are great indeed. The first eschatological promise (2:26c–27) is astonishing in its breadth and implications. It takes the form of an incredible paraphrase (see additional notes) of Ps. 2:8–9, a passage interpreted messianically in the first century:^[18] “Ask of me, and I will make the nations your inheritance,^[19] the ends of the earth your possession. You will rule then with an iron scepter; you will dash them to pieces like pottery.” The exalted Christ here replaces the psalmist’s “inheritance” with the idea of a new “authority” (ἐξουσίαν, *exousian*)^[20] given to the conqueror over the “nations,” probably as a thesis statement for the meaning of the whole. Scholars have long debated, however, whether this “authority” connotes rule over the nations or “power” to destroy the nations. The term itself can mean either, and the decision depends on the interpretation of the whole of 2:26c–27. Further, what are the τῶν ἐθνῶν (*tōn ethnōn*, nations)? Some have limited this to the heretical cult, but that is impossible here. The OT promised that the saints would participate in ruling over the messianic kingdom (Ps. 149:5–9; Isa. 60:14; Dan. 7:14, 18, 27). Jesus taught that the meek would inherit the earth (Matt. 5:5) and later that his disciples would sit on twelve thrones judging the twelve tribes (Matt. 19:28 par. Luke 22:30). Paul promised that believers will reign with him (2 Tim. 2:12) and judge the earth, even the angels (1 Cor. 6:2–3). In the Apocalypse the saints’ sharing in his final victory and rule is a frequent theme (1:6; 3:21; 5:10; 20:4, 6). The “authority” of the saints “over”^[21]

the nations must be understood in this light.

This authority is clarified with strong language in the second part of the paraphrase (2:27). The meaning of ποιμανεῖ αὐτοὺς ἐν ῥάβδῳ σιδηρᾷ (*poimanei autous en rhabdō sidēra*, shepherd them with a rod of iron) is a crux for this passage. This clause is almost word for word from Ps. 2:9 LXX, and its relationship to the MT is debated. The verb in the MT is תִּשְׁבֹּרֵם (tēšbōrēm, you will break them). The LXX seems to borrow its verb from a different vocalization, ἡπάσκει (r~~h~~ shepherd) instead of ἡσπάσει (r~~h~~ break). R. Charles (1920: 1.75–76; so also Aune 1997: 210) theorizes correctly that John avoids this error by utilizing a secondary meaning of ποιμανεῖ, to “destroy” (as in Ps. 48:14; Jer. 6:3; Mic. 5:6). John follows the original meaning of Ps. 2, which celebrates the victory of God’s “anointed” over “the kings of the earth,” concluding with a warning that they might be “destroyed” (Ps. 2:12). Thus those who interpret this as “rule” (e.g., Walvoord, Mounce, Chilton, Hemer; cf. the use of ποιμάνω for “rule” in Rev. 7:17) are wrong.^[22] The violence connoted in the “rod of iron” and the “shattering” of the pottery are simply too strong for “rule.” The “rod of iron” in this context is probably not so much the king’s scepter as the shepherd’s club, a large wooden club capped with iron for killing animals that endangered the sheep (with Swete 1911: 47); yet with the Davidic shepherd imagery of the OT, the two should not be separated overmuch. The nations who oppose the saints will be “destroyed” by them. In 12:5 and 19:15, it is Christ who wields this “rod of iron,” and it is startling that the saints will participate in the final judgment (see 17:14; 19:14, where the “called, chosen, and faithful” are part of “the armies of heaven”).

The last part of the Psalm paraphrase is close to the LXX but not exact in the details. Nevertheless, the same terms are present. The rebellious nations will be “shattered like vessels of pottery.” The verb συντρίβεται (*syntribetai*, shattered), another futuristic present parallel with the future “will destroy,” pictures a potter throwing his jar on the floor to “break” it (Mark 14:3 of an alabaster flask). A “potter’s vessel” is made of clay and will break into countless pieces when struck or thrown down. Krodel (1989: 129) tells how earthen pots were often inscribed with the names of a nation’s enemies and then ritually smashed to symbolize the future victory of the king. The imagery is that of total destruction. This depicts the absolute devastation of the hostile nations by the Messiah and his people. There is no corresponding teaching in the NT to tell us further what this participation in the final war will be like. The saints will take part, but what part we play cannot be known. In the imagery of the final war (19:11–21), the nations are destroyed entirely by “the sword from his mouth” (19:15). We will be “following” him (v. 14; cf. 17:14), but beyond that we cannot know.

Finally, Christ places the “power” of the overcomer (2:26c) in perspective by adding that it is ὥς κἀγὼ εἶληλα παρὰ τοῦ πατρός μου (*hōs kagō eilēpha para tou patros mou*, just as I received from my father). There is a chain of authority from the Father^[23] to the Son to the conqueror. This is a constant theme in the Gospel of John, with the Son as “sent” from the Father with full authority (John 5:23–24; 6:38–44; et al.) and in turn “sending” his disciples with full authority (John 17:18; 20:21). This statement is reminiscent of Ps. 2:7, thus continuing the previous allusion; it was quoted at Jesus’ baptism (Mark 1:11 par.) and transfiguration (Mark 9:7 par.). The basis of our participation in the messianic victory is our participation in his messianic power.

The second eschatological gift to the conqueror is “the morning star” (τὸν ἀστέρα τὸν πρωῒνόν, *ton astera ton prōinon*) in verse 28. No one seems quite sure what this means. As with so much of the imagery of this book, innumerable proposals have been made: (1) an allusion to Dan. 12:3 centering on the immortality of the saints, with the promise that they will shine like stars (so

Beckwith, Moffatt, Ladd, Thomas); (2) an allusion to the king of Babylon/Lucifer in Isa. 14:12 (so Alford, Aune); (3) an allusion to Num. 24:17 (Balaam's prophecy) with its use of a star and scepter as messianic symbols (so Hemer, Mounce, Ford, Beale; cf. Aune); (4) Christ as the "morning star" in Rev. 22:16 (so Morris, Johnson, P. Hughes, Roloff); (5) a reference to the planet Venus as a symbol of sovereignty often used by Roman generals and emperors (so Beasley-Murray, Krodel, Giesen); (6) a reference to the Holy Spirit as equivalent to Ishtar (Lohmeyer 1926: 28). Some of the options are interesting but unlikely (e.g., Lucifer or the Holy Spirit). Others are intriguing but difficult to prove in the context (for instance, the resurrection/exaltation of the saints [Dan. 12:3]; it fits the book as a whole but is questionable in this context). The two that fit this context best are the Balaam prophecy of Num. 24:17 with its close connection to the Nicolaitans (Rev. 2:14), and the planet Venus with its symbol of Roman sovereignty and might. It is difficult to choose between them, for the one fits the heresy fought in this letter, and the other fits the pressure of paganism on the church. It is probably best to see the two as intertwined here. Numbers 24:17 ("a star will come out of Jacob") is behind the title for Christ ("the morning star") in Rev. 22:16, and it was understood messianically in Judaism (T. Levi 18.3; 4QTest 9–13). In 2:26c–27 Christ allows the church to share in his messianic authority (compare 19:15 with 2:26c–27; 22:16 with 2:28), and here Christ allows the church to share also in his messianic glory as the "morning star." The glory of the saints in heaven could be part of the "rule" of the conqueror with Christ, but indirectly rather than directly. This understanding would also go well with the idea of the planet Venus, since 2:26–27 depicts the final victory over the pagan nations. Roman legions carried the symbol of Venus on their banners to depict Roman invincibility. In this context Christ would be saying that the only final sovereignty and power lay with himself and his victorious followers.^[24]

Concluding this letter in 2:29 is the familiar call to listen, which again (cf. 2:7, 11, 17) challenges their willingness to hear the truths of this prophecy and to obey the demands of the "Spirit." The implications go beyond the situation in Thyatira to address all the "churches," for the problems are found everywhere. The pattern here (with the call last) is followed in the rest of the letters (3:6, 13, 22), probably for stylistic reasons.

Summary and Contextualization

There are three areas of emphasis in this letter, and all relate closely to the church today. First, it is crucial to be growing in the same deeds—love, faith, service, and perseverance (2:19, 25). The church today is facing the same pressures as Thyatira, and it would be good if the Lord could say of us too, "Your latter deeds are greater than your first." Second, as already stated in the previous letter, we too are fighting many heretical cult movements and need to take a strong stand. We must protect the church from the unscrupulous who lead their followers astray in order to build their own kingdom, who water down the faith to make it more amenable to the secular market. Third, the major area Thyatira differs from Pergamum is that the greatest pressure came not from pagan religion but from the world of business or commerce. This in many ways fits our culture even more closely, for many Christians compromise their walk with Christ to enhance their profits or to keep their jobs. The judgment of Christ can fall upon our churches in the same way it did Thyatira. We must make certain that God is our primary business partner, and that we consider our careers a calling from God and an opportunity to magnify Christ. Otherwise, we may end up like Jezebel.

Additional Notes

2:20. σου: Several ancient manuscripts (A 046 1006 Cyprian et al.) add σου after γυναῖκα, while the majority (⌚ C P 1 1611 Tertullian et al.) omit it. If σου is original, the antecedent would have to be the “angel” (in that case the bishop or leader of the church) addressed in 2:18. Due to (1) better manuscript support for the omission, and (2) the likelihood that it was added by assimilation to the four other occurrences of σου in 2:19–20, it is probable that σου is a later addition. If it were original, it would raise an even greater problem at Thyatira, that the leader of the heretics was the very wife of the leader of the church. It is hard to see how Christ would fail to address such a situation if that were the case.

2:22. Several manuscripts seek to make the κλῖνῃν more explicit by adding λυλάκην (A) or κλίβανον (2071 arm) or ἀσθένειαν (1597 cop^{sa}). However, the best manuscript support (and least likely reading) favors κλῖνῃν by itself.

2:22. Some good manuscripts (⌚ A 2050) have the future μετανοήσουσιν after ἐὰν μὴ rather than the aorist subjunctive μετανοήσωσιν (supported by C Byz). The meaning does not change either way (as BDF §369.2 says, there is a tendency in Revelation to replace the aorist subjunctive with the future), but slightly greater manuscript support attends the aorist subjunctive, and it may have been changed by assimilation to other futures in similar situations in the book.

2:22. The genitive singular αὐτῆς, making these Jezebel’s works (supported by ⌚ C P 1006 and several other witnesses), is replaced in A 1 1854 2081 Byz et al. by αὐτῶν. However, there is slightly stronger support for the singular, and most feel the plural “their” was introduced by later scribes to emphasize more directly the guilt of the followers.

2:26–27. The relationship of the MT, LXX, and quotation/paraphrase of Ps. 2:8–9 here is highly debated. This is closer to an actual quotation than most, but while the second line is near the LXX, the first and third are distinct. The first line borrows only one part of verse 8 (“I will give you the nations for your inheritance”) and changes κληρονομίαν to ἐξουσίαν ἐπί, undoubtedly to heighten the message. The second line is the same (changing only the verb from second to third person). The third line maintains the message intact but slightly changes the wording, replacing the singular and genitival σκεῦος κεραμέως with the plural and adjectival τὰ σκεύη τὰ κεραμικά, and switching from the future “will shatter” to the futuristic present “going to shatter.” In other words, there is only one major change to the LXX (“inheritance” to “power”), and the message of Ps. 2 (David is God’s anointed and will destroy his enemies) is carried over to Rev. 2. Also, this is not a loose paraphrase but is faithful to the original; more than an allusion, it is as close as the book gets to a quotation.

2:27. συντριβεται: A few manuscripts (P Q Byz lat) read the future συντριβήσεται, but there is better support (⌚ A C et al.) to read the present as here. It is likely that the present tense here was changed to future in order to conform with the future ποιμανεῖ in the line above.

Caird (1966: 45–46) and Sweet (1979: 96) ask when this “power” and right to “smash” the nations will take place. They argue that it cannot be in any “millennial kingdom” or in the “New Jerusalem,” since the nations will already have been destroyed at that time. Therefore, they conclude, this must take place in the present rather than in an eschatological future—“not by compromise with the nations and use of their weapons, but in faithful witness and death (see on 11:3–13), reproducing Christ’s authority” (Sweet). Thus paganism is destroyed by the “iron bar” of the death of Christ and the martyrdom of the saints. On the basis of 1:7, one has to consider this a viable alternative. However, neither the context nor the OT text behind the passage (unlike 1:7) allows such an interpretation. Moreover, in 17:14 and 19:15 there is a future event in which the saints take part, the final war. Therefore, this depicts the actual destruction of the hostile nations rather than their defeat via witness and martyrdom.

5. Letter to Sardis (3:1–6)

Thirty to forty miles southeast of Thyatira, Sardis was one of the most glorious cities in Asia, but much of its splendor lay in the past. It was certainly one of the most ancient; founded perhaps about 1200 B.C., it became the capital of the wealthy and powerful Lydian kingdom. It was situated in the Hermus basin on one of the alluvial hills between the plain and Mount Tmolus. The acropolis lay partly at the top of one of those hills with a fifteen-hundred-foot precipice on three sides and a steep approach on the south side that connected it to the mountain. From the beginning it was an almost impregnable military stronghold. It also developed on the plain to the north and west of the hill.

One of the most famous early kings was Gyges in the seventh century B.C. He established the city's wealth and power and was known to the Assyrians as "Gugu"; some even say he was the prototype of "Gog" in Ezek. 38–39 (so Hemer 1986: 131). At any rate the city was a military power that rarely lost a battle and was feared by all. The city also attained great wealth through commerce and trade. Legend stated that Midas left his gold in the springs of Pactolus that ran through the city, and that legend may have come from the presence of gold dust in the springs that added to their wealth (Hemer 1986: 130–31). Sardis was the first to mint gold and silver coins. Gyges's son, Croesus, was so powerful that he thought to attack Cyrus of Persia. After an initial battle, he retired back to Sardis for the winter, expecting Cyrus also to return home. However, Cyrus pursued Croesus and surprised him, destroying his vaunted cavalry. Croesus then went into his fortress and prepared for a siege. However, one of Cyrus's troops climbed up a crevice on the "unscalable" cliff at an unobserved point and opened the gates. Sardis fell after only fourteen days of the siege in 546 B.C. This so astounded the Greek world that "capturing Sardis" became a saying for achieving the impossible.

However, this feat was to be repeated. Sardis became the headquarters of the Persian governor, but over the next three hundred years there were several military debacles, such as a Lydian revolt a few years later, the burning of the lower city by the Ionians in 499 B.C., the use of the city as a military base by Xerxes, and the surrender of Sardis to Alexander without a fight. The second major defeat, however, occurred when Antiochus III invaded in 214 B.C. to crush a rebellion. Again, a Cretan named Lagoras climbed the cliff at an unguarded spot accompanied by fifteen men (while the soldiers of Sardis carelessly watched only the major pass to the city) and opened the gates. After that Sardis surrendered its importance to Pergamum. It still continued in its wealth and commercial prosperity (it claimed to have invented the process for dyeing wool and was a center of that industry) but now lived mostly in the past.

In A.D. 17 a terrible earthquake devastated Sardis and Philadelphia; Pliny called this the worst disaster in human memory. Sardis was rebuilt after extensive aid from Emperor Augustus. To express their appreciation, the citizens of Sardis created a coin with his likeness and inscribed it "Caesarean Sardis." In A.D. 26 they appealed to Rome for the honor of erecting a temple to Caesar, but the privilege was awarded to Smyrna. In addition, there was a huge (but unfinished) temple to Artemis that rivaled the temple in Ephesus. Known also as the Anatolian goddess Cybele, Artemis was the patron goddess of Sardis. The people of Sardis had a special interest in death and immortality, and much of their religious life was nature worship focusing on the fertility cycle and bringing life out of death. A sacred hot springs two miles from the city seems to have been

connected with the god of the underworld and these same themes.

Sardis had a large Jewish community that dated from the fifth or fourth century B.C. Antiochus III placed two thousand Jewish citizens in the area, and there is evidence that many Jews in Sardis retained Roman citizenship. Josephus speaks of a large, wealthy Jewish community there. One of the largest synagogues ever excavated was built there in the second century A.D. Since it is part of a gymnasium complex, it seems Jewish and Hellenistic life had a remarkable confluence there, and Hemer (1986: 137) thinks this may demonstrate a Jewish and Christian accommodation to pagan surroundings, a syncretism with the local culture. While Christian syncretism cannot be known from outside sources, there are some indications in this letter that would support such a conclusion.[1]

- a. Address and prophetic messenger formula (3:1a)
- b. “Strength” (3:1b)
- c. Solution (3:2–3)
- d. Promise and challenge to the overcomers (3:4–6)

Exegesis and Exposition

¹To the angel of the church in Sardis, write: “This is what the one who has the sevenfold Spirit of God and the seven stars says: ‘I know your deeds, that you have a name, “Alive,” but you are actually “Dead.”’ ²Show yourselves to be watchful and start to strengthen what survives, what is about to die, for I have not found any of your works to be complete in the sight of my God. ³Therefore, continue to remember what you have received and heard. Keep it and repent. Unless you become watchful, I will come like a thief, and you will never know what time I will come upon you. ⁴But you have a few people in Sardis who have not soiled their garments. They will walk with me in white, for they are worthy. ⁵In the same way the one who overcomes is going to walk in white garments. I will never erase their name from the book of life. I will confess their name before my Father and his angels. ⁶Let the one who has an ear heed what the Spirit says to the churches.”

a. Address and Prophetic Messenger Formula (3:1a)

The address to the angel of Sardis follows the formula of 2:1, 8, 18 and has the same purpose, demonstrating the eschatological importance of this message by sending it to the church via its guardian angel (cf. the place of an angel in the original revelation to John in 1:1). As in every letter, the names of Christ adduced here are critical to Sardis. First, Jesus “holds” (ἔχω, *echōn*, connotes divine control, as in 1:16, 18) the “seven spirits,” a likely reference to the “sevenfold Holy Spirit” (from Zech. 4:2, 10) as discussed in Rev. 1:4 (cf. 4:5; 5:6). As in 1:4, this details the complete and adequate work of the Spirit in the community. The church of Sardis, nearly dead (3:1–2), can be revived only if the Spirit takes over, and Christ has the power of the Spirit available for them. The seven lamps of Zech. 4:2 and the seven eyes of Zech. 4:10 are upon the Sardis church in the person of the Holy Spirit (Moyise 1995: 33). Also, Christ controls the “seven stars,” which in Rev. 1:20 refers to “the seven angels of the churches.” Christ’s controlling the seven stars (angels) suggests that through their angel Christ controls the church, and it must answer to him alone. Like the church at Ephesus (2:1, “who holds the seven stars in his right hand”), the Sardians had to understand who was sovereign in this situation.

b. “Strength” (3:1b)

This is the one place in the seven letters where the normal formula for what they are doing right

“I know your deeds”) actually details their key weakness. Therefore, it is ironic here, for there is little good to say about the church. There is no need for a section on weaknesses (“But I hold this against you”), for their “strength” is their weakness! Only the “righteous remnant” (3:4), an obvious minority, can be given any encouragement, and they are placed in direct proximity to the promise given to the “overcomer” (3:5). Their “works” are defined in a strange way—ὄνομα ἔχεις (*onoma echeis*, you have a name), further irony, for they claim the Christian “name,”^[2] “Life,” but^[3] actually retain the pagan name, “Death.”^[4] It is a sad thing when the only accomplishment (“deed”) of a church is what it names itself, especially if the reality shows that name to be a lie, as here. Their past deeds gave them a reputation among other churches for being alive for Christ, but their present deeds show a quite different picture (in accordance with their city’s history). The “life/death” antithesis, as said above, was especially relevant to Sardis, where religious speculation centered on this question. Just outside their city was a famous necropolis, or cemetery, with the graves of long-dead kings. The assembly at Sardis represented that cemetery more than a living church. If they wanted to live, they had to turn from their false deeds to the life-giving Spirit. That is the subject of the next section.

c. Solution (3:2–3)

Five imperatives occur in these verses, all of them focusing on the need for spiritual vigilance. The church is like the city. Twice before, the city had fallen because the watchmen were not on the walls and assailants had climbed the cliffs to let in invaders. The church is being rebuked for the same lack of vigilance. The first command is γίνου γρηγορῶν (*ginou grēgorōn*). While it could be translated “be watchful,” with γίνου equivalent to εἶναι (*einai*, to be), most (e.g., Hort, Beckwith, Hemer, Mounce) agree that it more properly means “show yourself to be watchful.” In other words, they have to change their ways and “prove” that they are vigilant. They have fallen asleep spiritually and must “wake up.” Γρηγορῶν is often used eschatologically to depict the spiritual watchfulness that is necessary to be ready for Christ’s return (Mark 13:35, 37; Matt. 24:42; 25:13; Luke 12:36–38; 1 Thess. 5:6), and it speaks of the “danger of [believers] reducing their full commitment to God through Christ and of allowing themselves to be seized by things of lesser value” (Nützel, *EDNT* 1:265).

Second, the church must στήρισον τὰ λοιπὰ (*stērisōn ta loipa*, strengthen what survives). The church as a whole was “dead” (3:1), but there was still a little that “survived.”^[5] As R. Charles (1920: 1.79) points out, the neuter includes both people and spiritual characteristics: both the minority that showed a little life and spiritual issues needed to be “strengthened,” with στήρισον a good example of an ingressive aorist imperative, “start to strengthen.”^[6] Their weakness in this area was destroying their church. The verb itself means to “support” or “stand something on its feet” and has the idea of establishing a thing by making it strong (cf. Acts 14:22; 1 Thess. 3:2–3; 1 Pet. 5:10; cf. Harder, *TDNT* 7:653–57). The reason for the desperate need to strengthen the church was that even the little that remained ἐμελλον ἀποθανεῖν (*emellon apothanein*, was about to die). Most commentators (R. Charles, Swete, Hemer, Thomas) take the imperfect to be epistolary, that is, looking at the action from the standpoint of the writer, but it might be better to state that this process of dying had been going on for some time and that the culmination (their death) was around the corner.^[7] There was hardly any time left, and they had to act quickly or die. When this verse is combined with 3:1 (their name is “Death”), the message is that most of the church is dead but a small minority remains with some life. However, even that small bit is on the verge of dying. Act fast while there is still time!

The reason for this command (γάρ, *gar*, for) is their inadequate “works,” though as I argue in the additional notes, it is better to render this “any of your works.” None of their deeds has been sufficient. In this book, εὑρηκα (*heurēka*, I have found)[8] often has juridical force (2:2; 5:4; 12:8; 14:5; 20:15). As Pedersen (*EDNT* 2:84) says, in forensic passages this verb “relates the conclusion of an investigation into the facts of a charge.” That is the sense here; they have been tried and found wanting. The problem is, their works (possibly the same ones from 2:19—love, faith, service, endurance—but undoubtedly others as well) were not “complete in the sight of my God.” God is the judge on the throne, and he has found their deeds “incomplete,” not just in quantity but even more in quality. Πληρόω (*plēroō*, I complete) in its many forms is common in the Johannine corpus for “full” or “complete,” as in “that your joy might be full” (John 16:24; cf. John 3:29; 12:3; 15:11; 17:13; 1 John 1:4). The idea here is to meet God’s standards (“in the sight of my God”), and in that the church is not only inadequate but under indictment. In the eyes of their contemporaries, they may have been more than sufficient, but not in the eyes of God. Christ has judged them, and now God is judging them. The great temple of Artemis in Sardis was unfinished, and perhaps John is saying that they resemble that building—unfinished and worthless. Christ calls the Father “my God” in Mark 15:34 and John 20:17 and four times in Rev. 3:12 alone. There can certainly be a subordinationist aspect to the phrase, but in this context it means rather that Christ’s judgment is one with his Father’s.

The final three imperatives in 3:3 flow out of the church’s inadequacy from the previous verse. There is an ABA pattern in 3:2–3, with the first two imperatives and the last three framing the statement regarding their incomplete works. The solution for spiritual inadequacy is to remember (and keep) and repent. This is similar to the solution for Ephesus (2:5, “remember . . . and repent”). Since both had a lack of love and inadequate works, it is natural that both should be told the same thing. As stated in 2:5, the present imperative μνημόνευε (*mnēmoneue*, continue to remember) demands a continual recall and actualization of the past truths they had been taught. It is not just bringing these realities to mind but putting them into practice in their lives. That which they are to “remember” is πῶς εἴληφας καὶ ἤκουσας (*pōs eilēphas kai ēkousas*, what you have received and heard). The two verbs tell the two ways these truths came to them, through apostolic tradition (“received”) and the teaching of the church (“heard”). “Received” is often a code word for the reception of tradition (cf. 1 Cor. 15:3, where it is παρέλαβον, *parelabon*). “Heard,” as in the call-to-listen formula (2:7, 11, 17, 29), usually means not just to listen but to believe and act on the teaching. The Christians of Sardis had not only been taught the Christian truths but had exemplified them in the past. Now they were in danger of losing it all.

The concomitant to remembering is “keeping” (τήρει, *tērei*, keep; again a present imperative commanding continual action). The strange thing is that there is no accusative, so one must supply an object to be “kept.” The most likely are the Christian truths “received and heard” from the establishing of the church. The verb itself means not only to “keep” or “guard” but to “obey.” Spiritual vigilance is seen in perseverance and obedient living of these spiritual realities. Finally, and that which sums up all the others, the church must μετανόησον (*metanoēson*, repent; a global aorist that covers all the other four imperatives). In every way, they needed to “change” their downward spiral and get right with God and Christ (cf. 2:5, 16; 3:19).

The urgent call for repentance is linked to the likelihood of an imminent end (so Behm, *TDNT* 4:1004). After the commands to get right with God, Christ gives a second reason (the second οὖν, *oun*, therefore, of 3:2–3) for the need of the Sardians to turn their lives around. The first told how; the second tells why. The ἐὰν μή (*ean mē*, if not) that introduces the challenge makes no

assumption regarding their response and should be translated “unless” (BAGD 211; cf. 2:22, “unless they repent of her works”). It is more warning than condition. The verb γρηγορήσης (*grēgorēsēs*, watch) repeats the first imperative and shows it is the main idea of the section. They must return to a constant state of spiritual vigilance^[9] if revival is ever to come.

If they should fail to maintain watchfulness, the same fate will happen to them as happened to Sardis with both Cyrus and Antiochus III: a “thief” will come and destroy them. The background to this warning in the history of the city has long been recognized, but it has special force in light of its presence elsewhere in the NT. This image goes back to Jesus, who used κλέπτης (*kleptēs*, thief) in an apocalyptic parable to warn of the dangers of lack of vigilance. Matthew 24:43 (par. Luke 12:39) says, “But understand this: If the owner of the house had known at what time of night the thief was coming, he would have kept watch and would not have let his house be broken into” (Bauckham 1993b: 106–9 believes this parousia parable is primarily behind the image here). Paul uses the same image in 1 Thess. 5:2–4 to contrast those who are ready with those who are not and will be caught unawares. In 2 Pet. 3:10, where a similar syncretistic heresy is being fought, the sudden and unexpected nature of the parousia is stressed.^[10] Finally, Rev. 16:15 is the other place this simile is used in this book,^[11] coming after the sixth bowl as a warning to the readers, and here too it is connected with spiritual vigilance (“Blessed is the one who keeps awake”). Therefore, there is a rich background, both in Sardis and in NT theology, for this image.

As a midrashic comment on the “thief” theology, Jesus adds, “You will never know what time I am coming upon you.”^[12] Each term is filled with a powerful message. First, οὐ μὴ γνῶς (*ou mē gnōs*, you will never know) is a grammatically emphatic future negation. While some have doubted the emphatic nature of this construction in the NT (see Zerwick 1963: §444), its use in John in an eschatological context is usually emphatic (e.g., John 6:35, 37; 10:28; 11:26; Rev. 18:7; 21:25). There is no way they can be ready unless they return to a state of vigilance. The next phrase, ποίαν^[13] ὥραν (*poian hōran*, what time), shows that the coming will be sudden and unexpected, and it will be the harbinger of the final judgment. Again there is a parallel with Ephesus; they are warned that Christ would “remove their lampstand” if they did not change their ways (2:5). God will judge not only the pagans but also the churches for the extent to which they have not remained true to Christ (cf. 16:15; 20:12–13; 21:7–8). As many have noted (Caird, Beasley-Murray, Mounce, Giesen, Aune, Beale), this is not the second coming here but a historical visitation in judgment. The second coming is taught in 2:25; 3:11; and 16:15, but this is a warning that Christ will visit the church in judgment now if they do not repent.

d. Promise and Challenge to the Overcomers (3:4–6)

Christ precedes his promise (3:5) with a word of encouragement to the righteous remnant in Sardis (3:4). The introductory ἀλλά (*alla*, but) contrasts this group with the unfaithful in 3:2–3. The very way Christ describes this minority (“not soiled their garments”) summarizes the sins of the rest of the church. A “few people”^[14] in Sardis “have not soiled their garments.” The imagery builds on one of the major sources of wealth at Sardis, its wool industry. Unlike the garments they make, their spiritual garments are “soiled.” The term means “unwashed” and can have a strong religious connotation of one “defiled,” for instance by eating meat sacrificed to idols (1 Cor. 8:7) or by immorality (Rev. 14:4). Moffatt (1983: 364) speaks of “votive inscriptions in Asia Minor, where soiled clothes disqualified the worshipper and dishonored the god.” By accommodating themselves to their pagan environment, the Sardis church had contaminated themselves and become “unclean.”

Those who had resisted this temptation are promised that they *περιπατήσουσιν μετ' ἐμοῦ ἐν λευκοῖς* (*peripatēsousin met' emou en leukois*, will walk with me in white). Continuing the imagery of garments as a symbol for the spiritual life, Christ promises a new life (“walk” as a symbol for one’s life) of purity (“white”). There are several possibilities for the background of this metaphor (from Hemer 1986: 146–47): the garment industry of Sardis (Moffatt 1983: 365); heavenly clothing, thus stressing victory, glory, and the heavenly state (R. Charles, Swete, Giesen); the filthy garments of Joshua the high priest replaced with clean in Zech. 3:1–10 (Alford, Moffatt, Thomas), thus priestly righteousness; the wedding garment, thus imputed righteousness (Trench); baptismal robes (Krodel, Roloff); and the Roman triumph, when citizens wore white robes in celebration of military victories (Ramsay, Ford, Hemer, Beale). Of these, the last fits the context best. In a city and a church that has primarily known defeat and only the bitter memory of past triumph, it would be exciting to think of oneself as part of the few “who would walk with Christ in the triumphal procession of his final victory” (Hemer: 1986: 147).

While the imagery of “walking” could go back to Christ’s itinerant ministry (Swete) or even to Enoch, who “walked with God” (Gen. 5:22, mentioned by Mounce), it best fits the triumphal procession imagery. Yet there is more than this, especially in the meaning of *λευκός* (*leukos*, white) in apocalyptic. It occurs fourteen times in this book (of twenty-three in the NT) and signifies not just victory but purity, holiness, glory, and celebration. Several (e.g., Mounce, Morris, Roloff, Beale) connect it strongly to the idea of justification in the book. In the transfiguration of Jesus (Mark 9:3 par.), it depicts the “radiance” of heavenly glory. While victory is the emphasis in Rev. 14:14 and 19:11 and part of the picture here, the primary thrust (especially due to the “soiled garment” earlier in the verse) is purity and holiness. They are victorious by remaining pure in a church that has increasingly gone apostate. The reason they can “walk in white” is *ὅτι ἄξιοί εἰσιν* (*hoti axioi eisin*, because they are worthy). Their “worthiness” is due to the fact that they have remained pure and their works are complete. Elsewhere in this book *ἄξιος* is predicated of God (4:11) or Christ (5:2, 4, 9, 12), though in 16:6 it is used of the earth-dwellers (who are “worthy” of judgment) and here of the saints (“worthy” of reward; cf. Luke 20:35; Eph. 4:1; Phil. 1:27; 1 Thess. 2:12). The faithful few in Sardis are called to emulate God and Christ, not the pagans.

This promise leads naturally into the eschatological gift for *ὁ νικῶν* (*ho nikōn*, the overcomer) in 3:5. As already discussed (2:7), the “conqueror” is the person who perseveres and remains faithful in the midst of external pressure from the pagans and internal pressure from false “Christian” movements. In this context, it means to refuse to accommodate the Christian walk to pagan demands, that is, to refuse to “soil your garments.” Thus Christ is saying the Sardian faithful of 3:4 are “overcomers” and will receive the rewards promised to the victorious (3:5).

There are three rewards. The first repeats the promise of 3:4, using a futuristic present (*περιβαλεῖται*, *peribaleitai*, going to walk) to make more emphatic the future “will walk” of that verse. As victorious conquerors, they will participate in Christ’s triumphant procession at the eschaton, wearing the “white” of 2:4. Second, as forgiven and kept secure, their “name will never be erased from the book of life.” The concept of the “book of life” is drawn from both the OT and Hellenistic worlds. The first mention in the OT is Exod. 32:32–33. After the golden calf incident, Moses begs God for forgiveness for Israel, stating that if God will not, “then blot me out of the book you have written.” Behind this was the register of the citizens of Israel (cf. Ps. 9:5; 87:6; Isa. 4:3). This came to be a heavenly book in which the names of the righteous were kept (Ps. 69:28; Dan. 12:1). Other heavenly tablets recorded tribulations (Ps. 56:8), judgment (Dan. 7:10), acts of faithfulness (Mal. 3:16), and one’s destiny (Ps. 139:16). It is likely that this refers to the same scroll

detailing deeds and rewards/judgment for one's conduct. Later apocalyptic ideas associated this register with eternal life and fellowship with God (1QM 12.3; Jub. 19.9; 36.10). In the pagan world the same imagery developed, beginning with the record of citizens in a city-state or country and moving to the records of the gods. This would have special meaning for Sardis, for a long time the capital of the Persian and Seleucid empires and thus a repository of such records (see Hemer 1986: 148). Moffatt (1983: 365) and Fuller (1983: 299–300) point out that in both Jewish and Hellenistic worlds the erasure of a name meant exclusion from the commonwealth or community. When Greeks were convicted of a serious crime, their names were removed from the civic register. In the OT removal of a name was associated with capital punishment (Deut. 29:20) and erasure from the national memory (Amalek in Exod. 17:14; Deut. 25:19).^[15]

This image continued in the NT. In Luke 10:20 Jesus says, “Rejoice that your names are written in heaven,” and both Phil. 4:3 (“fellow workers, whose names are written in the book of life”) and Heb. 12:23 (“the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven”) make use of this theme. In Revelation it is a major motif, linked with predestination (“from the foundation of the world,” 13:8; 17:8), the record of one's deeds (20:12), and eternal reward or punishment (20:15). Revelation 21:27 refers to it as “the Lamb's book of life,” and 13:8 links it also with the cross. In other words, participation depends on Christ's sacrificial death and the believer's faithful perseverance in Christ. Both aspects must remain intact (see additional notes below). The “book of life” itself contains both the names and the deeds of all who claim allegiance to Christ, and only those who remain faithful will stay in it. The verb *ἐξαλείψω* (*exaleipsō*, I will blot out) was often used of a name “erased” from a written record (Deut. 9:14; 29:20; Isa. 48:19; 56:5) and became a metaphor for removal or destruction. Here those who remain “unspotted” from the pagan surroundings are promised eternal reward in the presence of God.

Finally, the faithful are told, “I will confess his name in the presence of my Father and in the presence of the angels.” This is a definite allusion to the *logia* Jesu in Matt. 10:32 (par. Luke 12:8), “Whoever acknowledges me before men, I will also acknowledge him before my Father in heaven.” In the dominical saying both the positive (“I will acknowledge”) and negative (“I will deny”) sides are present, and it is likely that the added “before his angels” alludes to the parallel (negative) form in Mark 8:38 (par. Luke 9:6), “If anyone is ashamed of me . . . the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when he comes in his Father's glory with the holy angels.” The majority in the church at Sardis had been “ashamed” of Christ, probably by compromising their Christian distinctives in order to be accepted by their peers. Behind the promise of 2:5 for the faithful minority, there is also a warning of judgment for the unfaithful in the church.^[16] *Ὁμολογήσω* (*homologēsō*, I will confess) in contexts like this has a definite forensic or juridical force. Christ is not so much a witness at the Final Assize but the judge and jury pronouncing the word of acceptance or rejection. “Name” occurs four times in this letter (3:1, 4, 5 [twice]). In the ancient world the “name” spoke of the essence or chief characteristic of the person. In Revelation, to have the “name of God” (3:12; 14:1; 22:4) is to be characterized as his; to have the “name of the beast” (13:17; 14:11) is to belong to Satan. Here the “name” is first of all written in the book of life and then confessed at the final divine court. Those who remain true to Christ have a new identity, a new citizenship, and a new future—eternal life in heaven.

Once more (3:6; cf. 2:7, 11, 17, 29) the call to heed the Spirit's message concludes the letter. The Spirit-led in Sardis and all “churches” (note the plural) who read this letter must hear and obey the warnings if they are to receive the promises. The message is from God, not just John, and the importance of responding to these truths could not be overstated.

Summary and Contextualization

One would hope that there are few churches like Sardis today, but there are many. Lack of spiritual vigilance in a secular world is as prevalent today (perhaps more so) as it was in John’s day. It is easy to get so caught up in the things of this life that we lose sight of the fact that only Christ controls the “stars”/churches. That is the heart of watchfulness, to acknowledge the supremacy of Christ in everything. Many churches, even entire denominations, have so compromised their beliefs and practices by accommodating to the fads of intelligentsia or the ways of the world that they have virtually ceased to be Christian. Every passage on the return of Christ in the NT (e.g., Rom. 13:11; James 5:8; 1 Pet. 4:7; 1 John 2:18) makes the point of living life from the perspective of future accountability to God. In such churches the righteous few, as here, must stand up and be counted. They must consider themselves missionaries to their own church and wake up those who are about to die while there is still time. In fact, they are responsible before God to do so.

Additional Notes

3:2. σου τὰ ἔργα: A few manuscripts (A C etc.) omit the article before ἔργα, resulting in the meaning “any of your works,” while others (ⲓ P etc.) retain the article. Some scholars (Hort, Moffatt, Mounce, Hemer) prefer the absence of the article on the grounds of “more difficult reading,” while others (R. Charles, Beckwith, Thomas) prefer its presence on the grounds of the author’s usual practice (cf. 2:2, 9; 3:1, 8, 15). The first is more harsh and could contradict the favorable statement that “some remain” (also 3:4), but it is more in keeping with the tone of the passage, and the argument from the more difficult reading is slightly stronger.

3:3. πῶς: Beckwith (1919: 474) states that πῶς here refers not so much to the manner (“how”) but the matter (“what”) of what they had been taught. This is not as unusual as it may first seem; as BAGD §732 says, it sometimes has the same meaning as ὅτι “in accordance w. the tendency in later Gk.” Hemer (1986: 261 n. 64) and Thomas (1992: 265–66), however, argue that mere content in this context lacks force. Thomas states that the focus is on the quality of their fine beginning and the manner in which they had once received these truths. However, the two verbs following, “received” and “kept,” are more in keeping with the doctrinal truths of the faith. It seems better to see the “works” of 3:2 as stating the “how” and the “received” truths of verse 3 as stating the “what.”

3:3. Ἐληλίας καὶ ἤκουσας: Scholars debate the relationship between the perfect Ἐληλίας and the aorist ἤκουσας. Some (Hort, Beckwith, Moffat, Hemer) argue that Ἐληλίας must be an aoristic perfect on the grounds of parallels between the two verbs and the frequent use of aoristic perfects in the book (cf. 5:7; 8:5; 11:17). Others (Swete, R. Charles, Mounce, Thomas) say that the change is deliberate: “Members of the church had received the faith as an abiding trust at the moment faith came by hearing” (Mounce 1998: 94). The problem is that in that case we would expect the verbs to be reversed, and the tendency today is to realize a closer relationship between tenses in tandem as here.

3:5. οὕτως: There are two problems, one text-critical and the other interpretive. Several traditions (ⲓ c P 046 TR etc.) read οὗτος rather than οὕτως, which has slightly stronger attestation (ⲓ* [A οὕτω] C 1006 etc.). Though some (e.g., Beckwith 1919: 475–76; Johnson 1981: 450) wonder if οὗτος might be preferred on interpretive grounds (see below), it is more likely that οὕτως was original and replaced either due to a hearing error (Hemer 1986: 262 n. 73 points out that even in NT times the distinction between long and short vowel pronunciation had probably disappeared) or because οὗτος made more sense in the context. In short, the manuscript superiority as well as the principle of “least likely reading” support οὕτως as the original reading. Closely connected is the meaning and force of οὕτως as the connective between 3:4 and 3:5. It could mean “likewise” and introduce a class of conquerors distinct from those in v. 4, but that is unlikely here. The faithful in Sardis (3:4) are certainly also “overcomers.” As Beckwith (1919: 476) points out, for this meaning the writer would more likely have used ὁμοίως or ὡσαύτως. It could also mean “thus, in the same manner,” stating that conquerors “just like” the faithful in Sardis would receive rewards from God. Or one could take it as inferential (Hemer 1986: 148, from Hort 1908: 33), drawing a conclusion from what is said in the previous verse. Either of the latter two meanings will work in this context, but the former (“in the same manner”) is slightly preferable. The faithful minority are the conquerors who will receive the rewards promised.

3:5. οὐ μὴ ἐξαλείψω τὸ ὄνομα αὐτοῦ ἐκ τῆς βίβλου τῆς ζωῆς: The significance of this for the security of the believer has received a great deal of attention. On the surface it seems to indicate that it is possible to lose one’s salvation. Noting the connection with the doctrine of election in 13:8 and 17:8, Caird (1966: 49) calls for a “conditional predestination. A man cannot earn the right to have his

name on the citizen roll, but he can forfeit it.” Mounce (1998: 97) recognizes the implications but answers that “it is hermeneutically unsound to base theological doctrine solely on either parables or apocalyptic imagery.” Few, however, are willing to place apocalyptic in that category. Thomas (1992: 260–63) notes several possible solutions: (1) This could be an example of litotes, in which the negative is stated (“never erase”) in order to stress the positive (“you are enrolled in the book of life”). If this is true, it could be an affirmation of security more than a warning against apostasy. But the promise is empty if the “blotting out” could never occur, and in Ps. 69:28 such a possibility is affirmed. (2) If this is a register of citizens whose names were erased upon death, this could refer only to those who profess Christ (3:1, “a name that you live”). However, it is difficult to conceive why those with an empty profession would be included on such a list in the first place. (3) There could be a distinction between the OT perspective (physical death) and the NT perspective (spiritual death), with this referring to the OT sense. However, it is likely that the OT sense, especially in Isa. 4:3 and Dan. 12:1, refers also to eternal life. (4) Thomas’s solution is to note 13:8 (cf. 5:9–10) and to argue that the book of life was written “before the foundation of the world” at the predestined “slaying of the Lamb.” Since his death affected the whole world (Christ died for all humankind), the names of all were in the book. Names are erased when there is no profession of faith, and in this case that would be the majority in the Sardian church. However, there is no indication in Revelation of such a phenomenon. In 13:8; 17:8; and 20:15 the earth-dwellers are those “whose names were *not* written in the book of life.” Thus those whose names are “erased” are a different group. Those “not written” are the earth-dwellers who worship the beast and have always rejected the gospel. Those “erased” are members of the Sardian church who failed to remain true to Christ. Moreover, there are other passages in Revelation on the possibility of losing one’s place in the kingdom (cf. 2:5; 21:7–8; 22:17–18) as well as corroborating material in the rest of the NT (e.g., John 15:1–6; Heb. 6:4–6; 10:26–31; 2 Pet. 2:20–22). The options are twofold: this can happen to members of the church who have participated in the covenant blessings but are not of the elect (the Calvinist view); or this is a possibility for all believers, and the only way to be sure of one’s final salvation is to persevere (the Arminian view). This latter option better fits the Book of Revelation.

6. Letter to Philadelphia (3:7–13)

Philadelphia (modern Alashehir) was thirty miles southeast of Sardis on the main trade route from Smyrna on the coast to the east (Mysia, Lydia, and Phrygia). It also lay on the major Roman postal road from Troas through Pergamum, Sardis, and then Philadelphia to the east. Thus the city was ideal for commerce and was called “the gateway to the east.” It was situated at the eastern end of a broad valley alongside the Cogamis River, tributary of the Hermus. It was on a rising hill that connected the Hermus Valley with Mount Tmolus and was strategically located both militarily and for trade routes. Its volcanic soil was extremely fertile and ideal for growing grapes. As a result it was agriculturally prosperous as well.

It was the most recent of the seven cities, founded sometime after 189 B.C. by either Eumenes II, king of Pergamum, or his younger brother Attalus Philadelphus, so-called because of his love and loyalty for his older sibling.[1] He lent his name to the city, which became known as the city of “brotherly love” and was proud of its origins. As a Pergamene city, Philadelphia was labeled by Ramsay “the missionary city.” Situated at the head of the trade and military road to Phrygia, the monarchs expected Philadelphia to introduce both Lydia and Phrygia (which had oriental customs) to Greek ways and to make them loyal subjects. The efforts were successful, and by the first century, Greek was the language spoken in those lands.

The one problem was its proclivity to earthquakes. While the active volcanoes made the soil fertile, the earthquakes made it difficult to live there. The same earthquake that devastated Sardis in A.D. 17 also leveled Philadelphia, and there were apparently aftershocks for some time that led much of the populace to live outside the city and farm. While Sardis may have been harder hit, Philadelphia was nearer the epicenter and suffered more lingering effects. Writers like Strabo spoke of the walls of the city being constantly cracked; the people lived in insecure buildings and made all their plans with earthquakes in mind. As a result of the havoc caused by the A.D. 17 earthquake, the emperor removed their obligation to pay tribute to Rome for five years so they could recover economically and reconstruct the city. Out of gratitude, Philadelphia renamed itself “Neocaesarea” for a time, erected a monument in Rome with the other twelve cities that received aid, and developed a cult in honor of the emperor’s adopted son Germanicus. In the 80s, the city also took the title “Flavia,” the name of the imperial dynasty. This shows how closely tied it was to Rome and the emperor during this period.

One negative incident took place under Domitian in A.D. 92. Probably to encourage grain crops to feed the Roman armies and due to a famine (though some think it was to protect the vine growers of Italy), the emperor issued an edict demanding that half the vines be cut down and no new ones planted. This seriously hampered their economy, for grain was not as productive, especially since the volcanic soil was not particularly suited to this crop. Moreover, the earthquakes plus the famines had already made life in the city difficult. The edict produced outrage throughout the province, because it takes years for vines to grow back, and this was disastrous to the region. Ties to the emperor dissipated, for there were no long-term results from the patronage, and now the edict callously threatened the very life of the city.

The religion of Philadelphia was similar to that of several of the cities, a syncretistic blend of Anatolian and Hellenistic practices. Its patron deity appropriately was Dionysus, god of wine. We do not know if the imperial cult was a critical part of the city in the late first century A.D. In the

early third century (211–17) it earned the honorific title *neōkoros* (temple warden), and in the fifth century it was called “Little Athens” due to the many temples and cults, but whether this went back to the time of this letter is uncertain. There is also no evidence for a strong Jewish community in Philadelphia, but the data in this letter indicate the situation was similar to Smyrna. Also, nothing is known of the origin of the church. The city probably was evangelized by disciples of Paul like the other six in these chapters, but we cannot know for certain. Aune (1997: 234) tells of a letter from Ignatius to the church there sometime after his visit in A.D. 110, indicating that it had a monarchical organization with presbyters and deacons under a bishop and that there was some Judaizing influence in the community.[2]

- a. Address and prophetic messenger formula (3:7)
- b. Strengths (3:8)
- c. Reward and challenge to overcome (3:9–12)
 - i. Vindication (3:9)
 - ii. Protection (3:10)
 - iii. Exhortation to persevere (3:11)
 - iv. Security and status (3:12)
- d. Call to listen (3:13)

Exegesis and Exposition

⁷To the angel of the church at Philadelphia, write:

“This is what he says—the holy one, the true one,
the one who holds the key of David,
who opens and no one closes,
and closes and no one opens:

⁸I know your works. Behold, I have placed an open door before you that no one can close. (I know) that you have little power, but you have kept my word and have not denied my name. ⁹Behold, I am going to make those of the synagogue of Satan, who say they are Jews but are not (indeed, they are liars)—behold, I will make them come and bow down before your feet. Then they will know that I have loved you. ¹⁰Because you have kept the teaching about my endurance, I will also keep you from the hour of trial that is about to come upon the whole earth to try those who dwell on the earth. ¹¹I am coming soon. Keep hold of what you have, lest someone take away your crown. ¹²I will make the one who overcomes a pillar in the temple of my God, and they will never again have to go outside it. I will write on them the name of my God, the name of the city of my God, the New Jerusalem that is going to descend out of heaven from my God, and my new name. ¹³Let the one who has an ear heed what the Spirit says to the churches.”

a. Address and Prophetic Messenger Formula (3:7)

As in all the letters, the letter is sent to the guardian angel of the church to add eschatological power to its message and to remind them of the seriousness of these issues. Philadelphia and Smyrna are the only two churches with no rebuke, and it is interesting that both were under severe threat from a powerful Jewish presence in the city. Therefore, the names of Christ chosen here reflect that situation and reassure the beleaguered Philadelphia Christians that the Messiah is indeed on their side, not on the side of the “synagogue of Satan” (3:9).

The first two titles, ὁ ἅγιος, ὁ ἀληθινός (*ho hagios, ho alēthinos*, the holy one, the true one), are intertwined by asyndeton (the absence of the conjunction) and are also combined in 6:10 to describe God. Here they describe Christ in OT terms.[3] It has long been noted that this letter alludes heavily to the OT, undoubtedly due to the battles with Judaism. God as “the holy one” is frequent in the OT (e.g., Ps. 16:10; Isa. 1:4; 37:23; Hab. 3:3), and the title refers to God/Christ as “set

apart” from this world, as Wholly Other and alone worthy of worship. Ἀληθινός is more difficult to interpret. Some (Beckwith, Kiddle, Alford, Chilton, Thomas) believe it means “genuine” and is used to refute the claims of hostile Jews that Jesus is a false messiah (or to show Jesus is “true” in contrast to the lying Jews; so Chilton 1987: 126). This fits the classical distinction, in which ἀληθινός refers to “genuine” and ἀληθής to being “faithful.” However, others (R. Charles, Hort, Hemer) believe that the classical distinction no longer holds. Thus it refers to the “faithfulness” of Christ, in the context of Philadelphia set in contrast with the unfaithfulness of the emperor. Both are viable, but since ἀληθινός is used exclusively in Revelation rather than ἀληθής, and since it is coupled with both πιστός (*pistos*, faithfulness; 3:14; 19:11; 21:5; 22:6) and δίκαιος (*dikaïos*, righteous; 15:3; 16:7; 19:2), it is likely that neither possibility should be excluded: Christ is both the “real” Messiah and the “faithful” one (so also Beale 1999: 283). In the context of these persecuted Christians, it means that Christ can be counted on to vindicate them in their trials and to reward them for their suffering.

Jesus also is ὁ ἔχων τὴν κλεῖν Δαυὶδ (*ho echōn tēn kleîn David*, the one holding the key of David). This stems from Isa. 22:22, where the Lord demanded that Eliakim replace Shebna as the chief steward of Hezekiah’s household and that he be given “the key to the house of David; what he opens no one can shut, and what he shuts no one can open.” In the Isaianic text this was access to the king and his palace. In a sense, he functioned as a secretary of state (so Johnson 1981: 452). This passage may have been interpreted messianically in segments of first-century Judaism,^[4] and it is probably understood typologically here as well. Eliakim is a type of the exalted Christ who controls “the keys of the kingdom” (cf. Matt. 16:18–19, where he passes the “keys” on to his followers, “and the gates of Hades shall not overcome [my church]”). In this context this describes Jesus as the Davidic Messiah who controls the entrance to God’s kingdom, the “New Jerusalem” (3:12). In the original context the “open/shut” parallel stressed the absolute power and authority of Eliakim. Here it means more. The Jews had probably excommunicated the Christians in Philadelphia from the synagogue (as throughout the Jewish world), but this declares unequivocally that only Christ, not they, has that authority. He alone can “open” and “shut” the gates to heaven. Moreover, the Jews excluded the believers from the synagogue, but Christ will exclude these Jews from God’s eternal kingdom. His decision will be final. When he “opens” the New Jerusalem (to the Gentiles), no one can change that decision. When he “closes” the door (to these Jews), this decision also cannot be altered.

b. Strengths (3:8)

With the basic formula “I know your deeds” (cf. 2:2, 19; 3:1, 15), Christ again points out what they are doing right. As with Smyrna, there is nothing but approval here. The church was right with the Lord and needed encouragement rather than denunciation. The text begins with that encouragement, and it comes in the form of a parenthesis (see additional notes). The ἰδοὺ (*idou*, behold) that begins this is the first of three (with 3:9), and as in 2:10 and 2:22, its purpose is to draw attention (as the aorist imperative of ὁράω [*horaō*, I see] it means literally “look!”) to a critical point. The rest of the statement details an eschatological “gift” (δέδωκα [*dedōka*, I have given] is normally used to detail the promise in the “overcomer” section), applying Isa. 22:22 to the church. Christ has the power to “open” and “shut,” and now he “gives” that authority to them^[5] à la Matt. 16:18–19; 18:18; John 20:23 (the “keys of the kingdom” = the authority to “bind” and “loose”).

There is a wide variety of opinion regarding the meaning of θύραν ἡνεωγμένην (*thyran hēneōgmenēn*, open door). Many scholars (Swete, R. Charles, Hort, Ramsay, Caird, Walvoord, Hemer,

P. Hughes, Harrington) take this as a reference to missionary opportunity, fitting Paul's use of the "wide door" to the Gentiles (1 Cor. 16:9; 2 Cor. 2:12; cf. Acts 14:27) and the situation of Philadelphia as a "missionary city" spreading Hellenistic culture. Others have seen this as referring to martyrdom as the "door" to God (Kiddle 1940: 49), prayer as the "door" (Barclay 1960: 1.164), or Christ as the "door" to salvation (Moffatt 1983: 366; Sweet 1979: 103, on the basis of John 10:7–9, "the door of the sheep"). However, the most common view today (Beckwith, Lohmeyer, Ladd, Mounce, Johnson, Prigent, Krodel, Thomas, Fekkes, Giesen, Aune, Beale) is to see this as the "door" to the kingdom. While the church has been excommunicated from the synagogue, Christ has the "keys" to the kingdom. He has opened the "door," and "no one could shut it."^[6] This is certainly more in keeping with 3:7.^[7]

After the parenthesis, Christ now turns to their "strength."^[8] Though they were a small church, they were faithful and persevered. A small number (mostly a few popular preachers; I have not found any commentators understanding it this way) interpret μικρὰν ἔχεις δύναμιν (*mikran echeis dynamin*, you have a little power) as a rebuke rather than a commendation, saying the church has "little (spiritual) power." This is exceedingly unlikely, for the whole context is positive on the Philadelphia church. Rather, it means that the church lacked size and stature in the community and was looked down upon and persecuted. They had "little authority" or influence. "But"^[9] they were faithful, and that has always been the test of divine blessing rather than success.

The two clauses, as in 3:7b, state the same point positively and then negatively. They have "kept my word and not denied my faith." The two aorist verbs could be global, summarizing the life of their church as faithfulness, or simply point to a past persecution in which they persevered. Most commentators assume the latter, but in that case there is difficulty with the present tense ἔχεις (*echeis*, you have) in the previous clause. Would the Philadelphia church presently "have" little strength yet in the past "have been" faithful? It seems more likely that, as elsewhere in this book (cf. 2:3, 13, 14; 3:4), the life of the church is summarized first by present, then by (global) aorist, verbs.^[10] In 2:26 and 3:3 the church is commanded to "keep" or remain faithful to Christ's deeds (2:26) and the truths of the church (3:3). The "word of Christ,"^[11] like the "word of God" in 1:2, 9, refers to his revealed truths, the gospel message. They have not only "guarded" (a connotation of this verb) the gospel from error but have "obeyed" (another connotation) it in the midst of severe persecution. The idea of "not denied my name" goes back to the previous letter, especially to 3:5b and its allusion to Matt. 10:32–33. Verse 32 ("whoever acknowledges me") is behind 3:4, while verse 33 (whoever denies me") is behind 3:8. Unlike the majority of Sardians, the Philadelphians refused to "deny" Jesus.

c. Reward and Challenge to Overcome (3:9–12)

As in the letter to Sardis (3:4–5), the promise to the overcomer is preceded by rewards promised to the faithful in the city. In Sardis it was only a "few" (3:4), but here the entire church is worthy.

i. Vindication (3:9)

Two further ἰδοὺ (*idou*, behold) clauses detail God's promise to vindicate his people among their (and God's) enemies, the Jews who had so severely persecuted them. The second seems redundant but completes the idea of the first half. As in 3:8, Christ begins with διδῶ (*didō*, I am giving), and while as in verse 8 a secondary meaning is present here ("I am going to make"),^[12] the deliberate

connection of divine “gifts” is still intended. There they were “given” an open door, here they are “given” vindication. The description of the Jews as “of [\[13\]](#) the synagogue of Satan” re-creates the terrible metaphor of 2:9, further cementing the link with the church of Smyrna. In fact, the language here deliberately re-creates 2:9, for this is followed by a virtual quotation of that verse (“they call themselves Jews, but they are not”) adding the comment, “but they lie.” The point is exactly the same. These Jews claim to be God’s people, but since they have rejected his Messiah and persecuted his people, they “lie” (cf. 1 John 1:10; 2:4) and “are not” his true people but rather belong to Satan (cf. John 8:44; 2 Cor. 11:13–15). As Paul said in Rom. 2:28–29, the true Jew is one “inwardly . . . of the heart.”

The vindication is now spelled out clearly, but it is highly debated. These false “Jews” would be “made” to acknowledge their error, but the form that will take depends on the interpretation of ἵνα ἥξουσιν καὶ προσκυνήσουσιν ἐνώπιον τῶν ποδῶν σου (*hina hēxousin kai prosky-nēsousin enōpion tōn podōn sou*, to come and fall at your feet). [\[14\]](#) It is closely tied with the “open door” above, and the same two major options are asserted. Most of those taking “open door” as missionary opportunity interpret this as the conversion of the Jews. Building on the many references to the conversion of the nations in Revelation (see on 1:7) and passages like 1 Cor. 14:25 (the unbeliever will “fall down and worship God”) and Rom. 11:26 (“And so all Israel will be saved”), the conversion of their Jewish persecutors is seen as their vindication. As attractive as this is, it is difficult to uphold such a view in the context. The passage alludes to Isa. 60:14, “The sons of your oppressors will come bowing before you; all who despise you will bow down at your feet” (cf. also Isa. 2:3; 14:2; 45:14; 49:23; Ezek. 36:23; Zech. 8:20–23). [\[15\]](#) The OT taught that the Gentiles would be forced to pay homage to the Jews at the eschaton, and now this promise is turned on its head: Jewish oppressors would be forced to pay homage to Gentile believers. Christ is promising these persecuted Christians that they would be vindicated by God, and this is a theme that will appear again and again in the book (6:9–11; 16:6; 18:20; 19:2). The telling point in favor of this interpretation is that they (the Jews) will bow “at your (σου, *sou*) feet” and not “at my (μου, *mou*) feet.” This is submission, not worship, and parallels 2:26–27, where the faithful saints are promised that they will participate in the judgment of their (and God’s) enemies. [\[16\]](#)

The final καί (*kai*, and) in verse 9 joins γνῶσιν (*gnōsin*, they will know) with the ἵνα clause, but interestingly it changes to the aorist subjunctive, perhaps parallel with the others (“I will make them come and bow and know”) or perhaps (with Swete 1911: 55) to bring out a purposive idea (“I will make them come and bow, so that they might know”). It is possible, as Swete theorizes, that two parts of Isaiah are combined here. The first part, “that they may know,” may well stem from Isa. 37:20, where Israel’s victory over the pagans is “so that [they] might know that you alone, O LORD, are God.” The second part, ὅτι ἐγὼ ἠγάπησά σε (*hoti egō ēgapēsa se*, that I have loved you), probably stems from Isa. 43:3, 4, where the defeat of the nations is “because I love you.” Again, the aorist “I have loved” is global, summarizing the love of God throughout the history of the church. The Jews will finally be aware that God’s true love is for those who have believed in his Messiah (cf. John 13:1; Rom. 8:35–39).

ii. Protection (3:10)

This is one of the more commented-upon verses in Revelation, especially since it is the most important single passage in the book for the dispensational position. Yet in the context it is the second promise to the Philadelphia church. The causal (ὅτι, *hoti*, because) clause that begins the verse modifies not 3:9 but the main clause of 3:10; it is placed first to emphasize their perseverance

as the basis of God's protection of them. Ἐτήρησας (*etērēsas*, have kept) is another global aorist referring to their life of endurance.^[17] It closely resembles 3:8, "you have kept my word," which referred to their faithful vigilance and obedience to the truths of the church. Here their watchful care centers on τὸν λόγον τῆς ὑπομονῆς μου (*ton logon tēs hypomonēs mou*, the word of^[18] my endurance). Nearly all agree (contra Krodel 1989: 139, and NIV, "my command to endure patiently") that μου in this context modifies "endurance" rather than the whole ("the word of endurance") and refers to the teachings about Christ's endurance (e.g., 2 Thess. 3:5; Heb. 12:2–3; as well as the Gospel stories of the life of Christ) that became a model for the steadfastness of the Philadelphian church in the midst of their own trials.

In light of their faithfulness to Christ, they are now given a critical promise by him.^[19] The verb, τηρήσω (*tērēsō*, I will keep), repeats the verb in the first clause but has a slightly different meaning. They faithfully "kept" or obeyed the teaching about him, so he will "keep" or "protect" them. Both are valid meanings, and by using the same term the text draws attention to the correspondence between their action and his. The debate is whether it means "protect from" or "remove from," and the issue centers on the significance of ἐκ (*ek*, out of). Many scholars (Moffatt; Mounce; Beasley-Murray; Brown 1966; Gundry 1973; Hemer 1986: 164–65; Giesen; Beale; Aune) connect this with John 17:15, "My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from [also τηρέω ἐκ] the evil one" (the same preposition occurs in 2 Pet. 2:9, "rescue from trials"). Gundry (1973: 55–60) argues that ἐκ must have a local force, meaning protection "out from within" the trial. In this sense it connotes not exemption from trials but protection within trials. However, others (Walvoord, Johnson, Townsend, Winfrey, Thomas) argue that John 17:15 has a different context (a present battle with evil rather than the final future battle) and that the preposition does not necessarily have a local sense but could also mean "preservation after removal from the period" (Thomas 1992: 285). It must be admitted that both readings are possible from the language, so context must show which is more likely.

Obviously, a decision on the meaning of τῆς ὥρας τοῦ πειρασμοῦ (*tēs hōras tou peirasmou*, the hour of trial) is essential to the meaning.^[20] The consensus view is that it refers to the final end-time trials that precede the eschaton. This is differentiated from the local "ten-day tribulation" of Smyrna (2:10) by its involvement of "the whole world" (τῆς οἰκουμένης ὅλης, *tēs oikoumenēs holēs*) and so connotes a worldwide conflagration, the messianic judgments of the rest of this book (cf. Dan. 12:1–2; Matt. 24:21–22; 2 Thess. 2:1–12). The "whole world" appears twice more, referring to those "led astray" by Satan in 12:9, and those whose "kings" are called to the final war by the false trinity in 16:14. Here they are the unbelievers who experience the wrath of God (the "trial" that "tests" here in 3:10) to be poured out in the seals, trumpets, and bowls. Hemer (1986: 164–65) challenges this, however, arguing that this is a local persecution on the grounds that the immediate context of 3:10–12 refers to the situation in Philadelphia. While there is some truth in this, the verse itself makes this a trial related to "the whole world" and uses the same μελλούσης (*mellousēs*, about to) that in eschatological contexts elsewhere (1:19; 8:13; 10:7; 12:5; 17:8) refers to the final events preceding the parousia. Of course, it can refer to imminent events in the present (2:10; 3:16; 6:11), but the context always indicates such. Here the universality of the event makes an apocalyptic thrust probable. Also, the purpose is πειράσαι τοὺς κατοικοῦντας ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς (*peirasai tous katoikountas epitēs gēs*, to try those who dwell on the earth). The term "earth-dwellers" (cf. 6:10; 8:13; 11:10; 12:12; 13:8, 12, 14; 17:2, 8) is important in the book and always refers to the unbelievers, the enemies of God who not only worship and follow the beast but also persecute the believers.^[21] They are the same group referred to by "the whole world" above. Finally, in 3:11 there is a

connection with the second “coming” of Christ. Therefore, this could not be a “trial” of the Philadelphia Christians.

In light of this, the view that sees this as protection rather than exemption from the trial is more likely. This is in keeping with emphases in the rest of the book, especially in connection with the seals, trumpets, and bowls. In the opening of the seals, the judgment falls upon the “earth” (6:4, 8), and it is “the kings of the earth” who cry out in the midst of the “wrath” (6:15, 17). In the trumpets, God commands the locusts to harm only the unbelievers (9:4). In 12:6, 14, the “woman” flees to the desert, where she is “taken care of” for this period. As Thomas (1992: 286) asks, however, “What good does it do to be preserved from the physical consequences of divine wrath and still fall prey to a martyr’s death?” It is certainly true that the saints are the focus of intense persecution (indeed, martyrdom) from the dragon and his followers (6:9–11; 12:12–13, 17; 13:7; 16:6; 20:4). There is a great difference, however, between the wrath of God and the wrath of the dragon. Throughout the NT, persecution is seen as the believers’ lot, indeed their great privilege (e.g., Mark 10:29–30; John 15:18–16:4; Phil 3:10; Col. 1:24; 1 Pet. 3:13–14). In Revelation martyrdom is seen as a victory over Satan, not a defeat (6:9–11; 7:14–17; 12:11). As when he put Christ on the cross, Satan defeats himself whenever he takes the life of one of the saints. Therefore, the point is that the Philadelphia church (identified with all faithful believers here) will be protected from the wrath of God against the unbelievers but not from the wrath of Satan, and that this protection is within and not a removal from (as in a pretribulation rapture) [22] that wrath.

iii. Exhortation to Persevere (3:11)

This is the fourth time the “coming” of Christ has been stressed but the first time it is positive (as in 22:7, 20). To Ephesus (2:5) Christ’s return would mean the removal of its lampstand, to Pergamum (2:16) judgment with the sword of his mouth, and to Sardis (3:3) sudden and unexpected judgment like a thief in the night. To Philadelphia, however, his coming would mean vindication and reward. Like the “trial” of 3:10, Christ’s “coming soon” [23] is one of the primary emphases of the book (1:7; 2:5, 16; 3:3, 11; 22:7, 12, 20). Their anticipated reward, like the judgment of their adversaries (3:10), is imminent. [24] Also, as I argued at 3:3, this “coming” has an inaugurated thrust, that is, it is first Jesus’ “coming” to them in comfort and protection, and second his final “coming” to vindicate them for their suffering. In light of that, they have a responsibility to persevere. They must κράτει ὃ ἔχεις (*kratei ho echeis*, hold fast to what you have). [25] The verb (“hold fast”) was used in 2:13–15 to contrast adherence to the name of Christ (2:13) with adherence to heresy (2:14, 15), and in 2:25 (as here) to command perseverance in the faith “until I come.” The emphasis is on the continual effort (present tense) needed to maintain their walk with Christ. “What you have,” of course, is the “open door that no one can shut” (3:7–8), namely their citizenship in the kingdom of God, as well as the promised future vindication (3:10) and protection (3:11) by God.

The warning is seen in ἵνα μηδεὶς λάβῃ τὸν στέφανόν σου (*hina mēdeis labē ton stephanon sou*, lest someone take away your crown). If they failed to maintain their walk, they too could lose their reward. One issue is the subject of the “taking away.” Since the imagery is athletic (the “crown,” as in 2:10, is the victor’s crown in the games), [26] most assume that the person “taking away” their crown is another athlete, because they have lost the race and forfeited their reward. Thus with this metaphor, it would be the Jews (or perhaps Satan—so Johnson 1981: 455) who might try to disqualify them. The one giving “the crown of life” to Smyrna in 2:10 was Christ, however, and it is more likely that he is the one who will “take the crown” away from them for failing in the race

(note the parallel in Paul's athletic metaphor for being "disqualified" [undoubtedly by God] in 1 Cor. 9:24–27).^[27] In conclusion, the Philadelphia Christians have won through to victory in the midst of severe persecution, but they still must persevere, for as in Rom. 11:17–21 (the Gentiles losing their place in the olive tree after being grafted in) they could still fail to attain. This is another warning like 2:5; 21:8; 22:18–19. The believer as well as the unbeliever will be "judged according to their works," and that judgment could be severe.

iv. Security and Status (3:12)

The promise to the "overcomer"^[28] (on this see 2:7) concludes the promises to the Philadelphia church and is twofold, a new security and a new name. Added to one in 3:8 and four in 3:9–11, there are seven promises to this church, by far the most of any letter. As with Smyrna, the churches that seem the weakest (characterized by faithfulness rather than "success") have the greatest rewards. First, Christ will "make" (ποιήσω, *poiēsō*) them "a pillar in the temple of my God." In Gal. 2:9 the leading apostles are called "pillars," and in 1 Tim. 3:15 the church is "a pillar and foundation of the truth." The idea there and here is stability and permanence. As Hemer (1986: 166) points out, the stress is on that which stands firm (Jer. 1:18) rather than that which supports (Isa. 22:23). We must remember that both the city (due to earthquakes and economic disasters) and the church (due to persecution) had never felt security or permanence, so this promise must have been most welcome.^[29]

Most see a close connection between the στῦλον (*stylon*, pillar) and the ὄνομα (*onoma*, name) inscribed on it. There are several options for the background of these metaphors (for the following, see Moffatt; Mounce; Beasley-Murray; Hemer 1986:166; Aune): (1) In 1 Kings 7:21 and 2 Chron. 3:15–17 Solomon placed two pillars in his temples and gave them the names Jachin ("he establishes") and Boaz ("in him is strength"). (2) In Isa. 22:15–25 (see the discussion on Rev. 3:7) Eliakim is called "a peg in a sure place" on which the weight of the house of David would rest. Yet in Isa. 22:25 that "peg" would give way in time, so this could yield a contrast with Eliakim. (3) In Exod. 28:36–38 a plate with "Holy to the Lord" was placed on Aaron's forehead, so the idea could be the names inscribed on the forehead of the victor. (4) In Jewish midrash, Abraham was viewed as a pillar on which the weight of the world rests (Lohmeyer, Moffatt). (5) This could be a reference to a local custom in which the priest of the imperial cult at the end of the year erected his statue in the temple and placed on it his name and his father's, his place of birth, and year of office. This would emphasize the priestly character of the victor (so R. Charles, Moffatt). (6) It was common to place names on pillars and even to sculpt pillars in human shapes. (7) There could be an allusion to the porticoes of Herod's temple in Jerusalem or to the colonnades of the Artemision in Ephesus. (8) This could be the "king's pillar" in Solomon's temple, thus identifying the believer as royalty (so Wilkinson 1988: 498–501).

There are two keys: the clearly metaphorical nature of "pillar in the temple" and its connection with security and permanence. Obviously, no single item above will suffice. There are two interconnected ideas, the pillar and the name of God written on the believer. Also, given the readers, it is likely that there are both Hellenistic and Jewish aspects. Finally, some of the options are speculative. Seeing it as the priest of the imperial court has insufficient proof (see Hemer 1986: 166–67), and there is nothing priestly in the context (contra R. Charles, Moffatt, Kiddle). Moreover, the midrash on Abraham does not fit this image. For the "pillar" image the OT background is probably the Solomonic pillars, perhaps the "king's pillar" (closer to this context than the Eliakim contrast,^[30] contra Beasley-Murray, Sweet) and the Hellenistic practice of writing the names of

important individuals on pillars. For the name of God written on the saints, the Aaronic parallel (Exod. 28:36–38) is closest.

In the Apocalypse the heavenly temple motif is frequent (7:15; 11:1, 2, 19; 14:15, 17; 15:5, 6, 8; 16:1, 17).^[31] The idea of the Lord in his temple is common in the OT (Ps. 11:4; 18:6; 27:4; Mic. 1:2; Hab. 2:20), and in Revelation it is the eschatological temple for the community of saints. Yet in the New Jerusalem there will be no need for a temple, for the city itself is the Holy of Holies (see on 21:16) and “the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple” (21:22). There is no contradiction between 21:22 and 3:12, for the “pillar in the temple” here is metaphorical for the permanent place the believer has in the final kingdom. The added *τοῦ θεοῦ μου* (*tou theou mou*, of my God) is significant. It is found four times in this verse alone. Elsewhere Jesus calls his Father “my God” (cf. 2 Cor. 1:3; Eph. 1:3; Heb. 1:2–9; 1 Pet. 1:3, which mention “the God of our Lord Jesus Christ”) in the cry of dereliction (Mark 14:34 par. Matt. 27:46), at his resurrection (John 20:17), and in the letter to Sardis (Rev. 3:2). As in 3:2 (and 1:6, “his God”) the oneness between Christ and the Father is emphasized (as also in “my father,” 2:27; 3:5, 21; or “his father,” 1:6; 14:1).

Equally important for this church is the added comment *καὶ ἔξω οὐ μὴ ἐξέλθῃ ἔτι* (*exō ou mē exelthē eti*, and you will never again^[32] go outside). Once again, the background is preeminent. In the introduction I noted how after the earthquake in A.D. 17 much of the populace of the city was forced to move outside the city and take up residence on the farms. Jesus is promising that they will be secure in the city of God and will never again be dislodged from their homes. Now their lives are characterized by uncertainty and weakness (“little strength” in 3:8). Now they suffer physical harm (from the earthquakes) and external persecution. Then they would have the security and strength they long for.

The second promise is the new “name” written on the believer (for background see above). This is a threefold “name” (note the repetition of *ὄνομα*, *onoma*, before each).^[33] To have “the name of my God” is to belong to him, to be of his essence and to be his child (compare the “adoption” theology of Rom. 8:14–17). As several point out (Swete, Beckwith, Hemer), the OT teaches that every Israelite had the name of God placed on himself or herself (Num. 6:27; Deut. 28:10; Isa. 43:7; Dan. 9:18–19). This passage could well also contain an echo of Isa. 62:2 (the “new name bestowed” by the Lord). In Revelation itself, the saints are first sealed on their forehead (7:3) and then given the name of God (14:1; 22:4) in opposition to the name of the beast on its followers (13:17; 14:11).

The second “name” is *τῆς πόλεως τοῦ θεοῦ μου, τῆς καινῆς Ἱερουσαλήμ* (*tēs poleōs tou theou mou tēs kainēs Ierousalēm*, the city of my God, the New Jerusalem). The closest parallel is the Roman practice of citizenship, often attached to particular cities (e.g., Paul of Tarsus). Thus this speaks of citizenship in the new kingdom of God. The idea of the heavenly Jerusalem stems from Ezekiel’s vision of the eschatological temple in Ezek. 40–48, specifically chapter 48. Beale (1999: 294) notes especially Ezek. 48:35, where the “name of the city” (the New Jerusalem) is called “the Lord is there,” since now his glory will dwell there permanently. There is also local imagery involved. Philadelphia had changed its name to Neocaesarea and then to Flavia in honor of its relationship to the emperor. Now the believer’s name is changed to that of his or her God. Yet there are two differences. For the city the relationship was patronage. For the Christian it is sonship. Also, the emperor betrayed his promises when he made the city destroy half its vine production. God will never betray his trust.

The “New Jerusalem” theme in Revelation is too extensive to note here (see 21:2 and Park 1995 for extensive discussion of this). Two NT passages help illuminate the theme, Gal. 4:26 (“the Jerusalem that is above”) and Heb. 12:22 (“the heavenly Jerusalem”; see also Heb. 13:14). In both,

the eschatological city is contrasted with the earthly to show the superiority of Christianity over Judaism. The community of the saints is therefore superior to the Jews who oppose them (this would also have meaning for the Philadelphians). There is a special connection with 21:1–22:5, the new heavens and the new earth, and especially the New Jerusalem of 21:2 (a close parallel to this verse). These chapters are the clearest description in the Bible of heaven and the afterlife. The idea of “coming out of heaven from my God” here refers to the New Jerusalem as it descends from heaven (21:2, 10), fulfilling the main biblical promise of life in the presence of God (21:3, “Now the dwelling of God is with humankind, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God”). In a city that had no settled structure, with buildings that at any moment could be torn apart by further tremors, it must have been tremendously encouraging to know they were citizens of an eternal city.

The final name is τὸ ὄνομά μου τὸ καινόν (*to onoma mou to kainon*, my new name). There is another ABA pattern in that the name of God and of Christ frame the name of the eschatological city. As stated above, the name of the Father and the Lamb is placed on the forehead of the believer (14:1; cf. 7:3). The “new name” of Jesus is not explicated. In Phil. 2:9 he is given “that name that is above every name,” and in Rev. 19:12 the returning Christ has “a name written on him that no one knows but he himself.” Some have thought the name is Yahweh (Phil. 2:9 is followed by the confession of 2:11, “Jesus Christ is Lord”), but that is hardly possible, since the “I am” sayings of John all connote the message “Jesus is Yahweh” (so it could hardly be “new”). Others think it could be the name of Rev. 19:13—directly after “the name that no one knows” we are told “his name is the Word of God.” But the link between 19:12–13 is tenuous, especially when John could hardly reveal a name “no one knows” in the next verse. Most likely this is a name hidden until the eschaton. The most amazing thing is not the meaning of the “new name” but the fact that we will share it.

d. Call to Listen (3:13)

As in all the final four letters, this call is placed last to apply all the comments directly to the reader. Not only the Philadelphia church but all who could share this church’s situation needs to “hear” and “obey” the promises and cautions of this letter. The Spirit is directly calling upon all the readers to respond to this important message. Yet it is up to them—the Spirit speaks, but they must have “ears to hear.” It is true that this church had nothing wrong with it, but that does not guarantee future faithfulness. They could still lose their “crown” and in that light had to “hold fast” to all they “had” (3:11). The way to “hold fast” is to continue to “heed” this message from the Spirit.

Summary and Contextualization

Every small church in a difficult area of ministry will find this letter encouraging. Every Christian uncertain about his or her gifts and place in the church as a whole will be comforted. The basic message is profound: God is more interested in faithfulness than success. I met a pastor who had been ministering in an inner-city situation where growth was impossible. He was told by a church growth leader that he should leave since there was no future in that church. The leaders in Philadelphia would have been told the same. Does God care only about suburban ministry where neighborhoods are exploding with people and “church growth” is almost inevitable? I think not. When we get to heaven, the greatest rewards may well be for the kind of Christians who persevered in situations like that in Philadelphia, who remained true to the Lord in an

extremely difficult situation. They are given an “open door” and a “crown” that no one can take away. Still, they can lose it by failing to “hold fast to what they have.” Thus the message begins and ends with perseverance, with “overcoming” any and all obstacles to the centrality of God and Christ in our lives. We will be vindicated; we will be given the very names of God and Christ for our own. We are citizens of heaven. But we must remain steadfast.

Additional Notes

3:7. ὁ ἔχων τὴν κλεῖν Δαυὶδ: Once again there is a question as to how the author is using the OT passage, in this case Isa. 22:22. The language of the LXX differs radically from the text here. In the first part the “key of David” is replaced by “the glory of David” (τὴν δόξαν Δαυὶδ). In the second part there is only one antithesis instead of two, and the terms are different—ἄρξει καὶ οὐκ ἔσται ὁ ἀντιλέγων—rather than this text’s ὁ ἀνοίγων καὶ οὐδεὶς κλείσει. Once again, it appears that a free translation from the MT is behind this text.

3:8. ἰδοῦ: There is a grammatical problem with this sentence. After the formula, the text has ἰδοῦ followed by a statement regarding the “open door” and then has the normal ὅτι clause detailing the situation at Philadelphia. The majority of commentators (e.g., Beckwith, R. Charles, Hort, Mounce) take this as a parenthesis stating encouragement followed by the actual “works” (ὅτι clause). Yet it is also possible to see this as the first of three ἰδοῦ clauses (with v. 9), in which case the ὅτι is causal, telling why the church was being given an “open door.” However, the latter view leaves the opening “I know your works” dangling without completion and so is unlikely.

3:12. Hemer (1986: 168–74) shows how the history of the Philadelphia church after this letter sheds light on the situation behind it. Ignatius’s letter to Philadelphia about A.D. 110 suggests a quite different situation than that found in this letter. There is a great deal of disunity and a certain schismatic group (perhaps docetic) that he calls to account. However, the major problem is an aggressive Judaism that is both challenging the Christians to prove their case from the OT and perhaps offering them sanctuary from the threat of the imperial cult if they will come under the umbrella of Judaism. Their attacks against the authority of the Christian documents may have led to an emphasis on prophecy and thus to the Montanist movement (with its teaching on prophecy as inspired and possessing canonical authority), which may have originated in Philadelphia. In other words, the Philadelphia church responded to Jewish attacks against their documents by developing newly inspired and authoritative teachings. This letter brought comfort with its message on perseverance and its promised reward but with its prophetic authority may have led to an overemphasis on prophecy in Philadelphia. Hemer’s thesis is plausible and illuminating. If true (and I think it is likely), it helps us understand better what was behind this letter.

7. Letter to Laodicea (3:14–22)

The traveler from Philadelphia would go forty-five miles southeast to Laodicea on the same major postal road from Pergamum through Thyatira, Sardis, and Philadelphia to the Mediterranean. The city was also one hundred miles east of Ephesus on the main Roman trade route to eastern Asia Minor. Philadelphia and Laodicea were situated on the only two routes into Phrygia (the eastern province) from the west. This confluence of major trade routes made Laodicea critical for trade and communications in the province. The city itself lay on a southern plateau about a half-mile square and a few hundred feet above the plain in the fertile Lycus Valley. It sat between two streams, the Asopus and the Capsus. The Lycus Valley was at the crossroads between Lydia, Phrygia, and Caria, so the region was politically important as well. Laodicea was the more important member of a tri-city formation with Hierapolis six miles north and Colosse ten miles east; all three cities were part of Phrygia.

The city was founded by the Seleucid king Antiochus II sometime before 253 B.C., when he divorced his wife Laodice, after whom he had named the city. He built on the site of an earlier settlement named Rhoas in order to establish Seleucid control of the region. For the next one hundred fifty years the two trade routes became more and more important, and Laodicea rose in prominence with them, eventually outstripping Colosse, the original major city. In 188 B.C. a Roman treaty switched it from Seleucid to Pergamene control; and when that kingdom was bequeathed to Rome (133 B.C.), it came under Roman rule. When other cities joined various revolts against Rome, Laodicea remained loyal, and so it thrived further. Under Cicero's proconsulship (51–50 B.C.) it was an administrative and judicial center for the region. It eventually became a banking center and an increasingly wealthy city. Known for its soft, raven-black wool (the product, it was thought, of the water drunk by the sheep), it outstripped other garment manufacturers in the district and became wealthier still. Finally, there was a famous school of medicine at Laodicea, connected with the temple of Men Karou ("god of the valley"), the god of healing. Followers of the teaching of Herophilos believed in compound medicines for complex diseases and developed a compound for curing eye diseases called "Phrygian powder," which brought in even more fame and money.

There were only two drawbacks to the city. First, like Philadelphia it lay in a region prone to earthquakes. One in A.D. 60 virtually destroyed the city, but unlike Philadelphia (and Hierapolis), Laodicea wanted no financial aid from Rome. Instead, the wealthy citizens rebuilt their city. Second, it had no water supply. They had to pipe in water from Denizli, six miles south, via an aqueduct that left the city vulnerable to weather and enemies.

Their religion, typical of that period, was syncretistic, a combination of local and Roman gods. The two main gods worshiped were Men and Zeus, but they also sent an annual delegation to the oracle of Apollo at Klaros. The temple of Men Karou was thirteen miles west but still the center of religious expression for the region. Judaism was also prominent in the city, both in numbers and influence. Antiochus III apparently settled two thousand families in the area, and as a key city Laodicea must have gotten a fair number of them. Some evidence indicates that several of these families became quite wealthy, and some took Greek names. Hemer (1986: 184), following Lightfoot, believes that the accommodation of the Jews to paganism in Laodicea may even have been the source for the Colossian heresy. This also could account for the absence of Jewish

opposition in this letter; their religious fervor had been compromised by syncretism.

It is likely that the three sister churches (Laodicea, Hierapolis, Colosse) were established at the same time by Epaphras, who founded the Colossian church (Col. 1:7) as well as evangelized Laodicea and Hierapolis (Col. 4:13) during Paul's three-year ministry in Ephesus (Acts 19). Paul had not visited these churches at the time of his first imprisonment (Col. 2:1), though he may have done so subsequently (Philem. 22). Many believe that the "epistle to Laodicea" (Col. 4:16) may have been Ephesians, which we know to have been a circular letter.[1] The church, like the city itself, had grown fat and complacent, satisfied with its wealth but quite devoid of any spiritual depth.[2] This letter has nothing good to say about Laodicea, which was thus worse than Sardis. There does not seem to be a hint of a faithful minority (as in 3:4).

- a. Address and prophetic messenger formula (3:14)
- b. "Strength" (3:15–16)
- c. The problem and its solution (3:17–18)
- d. Solution developed further (3:19–20)
- e. Challenge to overcome and call to listen (3:21–22)

Exegesis and Exposition

¹⁴To the angel of the church in Laodicea, write: "This is what the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the beginning of God's creation, says: ¹⁵I know your deeds. You are neither cold nor hot. You should be cold or hot. ¹⁶So because you are lukewarm—neither cold nor hot—I am about to vomit you out of my mouth. ¹⁷You are saying, 'I am rich; I am wealthy and do not need anything.' You do not realize that you are wretched and pitiful as well as poor and blind and naked. ¹⁸I counsel you to purchase from me gold refined by fire so you can truly be wealthy, and white garments so you can be clothed and your shameful nakedness not be revealed, and eye salve to anoint your eyes so you can see. ¹⁹All those whom I love I correct and discipline. Be zealous and repent. ²⁰Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If any hear my voice and opens the door, I will enter in and dine with them, and they with me. ²¹I will grant to the overcomer the right to sit with me on my throne, as I also overcame and sat with my Father on his throne. ²²Let the one who has an ear heed what the Spirit says to the churches."

a. Address and Prophetic Messenger Formula (3:14)

As in every one of the seven letters, the guardian angel of the church is addressed and seemingly asked to intercede with the church. The Laodiceans thereby must realize how critical the points of the letter are. In a sense they are bringing guilt on the angel in control of their church. The names of Christ in the prophetic messenger formula (see on 2:1) are quite significant,[3] and the contrast with the smug Laodiceans is obvious. First, Christ is ὁ Ἀμήν (*ho Amēn*, the Amen). This is probably an echo of Isa. 65:16, which twice has "the God of truth," with the MT בֵּהוֹשֵׁעַ אֱמֵן (*bē hōhê Amēn*, by the God of amen) and the LXX τὸν θεὸν τὸν ἀληθινόν (*ton theon ton alēthinon*, the true God)[4] both times. The Hebrew אָמֵן means to "confirm" or "verify" and was often used in the OT to affirm a prayer (1 Chron. 16:36) or a hymn (Ps. 41:13).[5] Jesus used it often (thirteen times in Mark, thirty-one in Matthew, six in Luke, and twenty-five double "amens" in John) to authenticate a particularly important or solemn truth. Jesus used this "not so much to direct attention to his divinity as to his authority to speak for God as the messenger of God" (Hawthorne, *DJG* 7). It emphasized the truthfulness and divine origin of the message. In this context, the Isaianic aspect predominates. Jesus partakes of God's truthfulness, his binding authority (Isa. 65:16 says whoever invokes a blessing or an oath "will do so by the God of truth"). Fekkes (1994: 139) draws three

conclusions from the Isaianic background: (1) this is another example of an OT divine title transferred to Jesus; (2) as linked to “faithful and true witness,” this emphasizes “the authenticity of Christ’s character and testimony”; (3) this could be another authenticity formula building on Jesus’ own use of Ἀμήν to introduce his solemn declarations. In short, Jesus alone can be trusted to keep his word, unlike the Laodiceans.

The first title is defined further^[6] in the second, ὁ μάρτυς ὁ πιστὸς καὶ ἀληθινός (*ho martys ho pistos kai alēthinos*, the faithful and true witness). All three terms are major concepts throughout this book. Jesus is the “faithful witness” in 1:5 (the two in 1:5 and 3:14 are the only NT occurrences of Jesus as “witness”), and Antipas is “my faithful witness” in 2:13. It is clear that Jesus is the model for persevering “faithfulness” as a “testimony” to the world of the superiority of God’s way. In the Apocalypse both “faithfulness” (see on 2:10) and “witness” (see 2:13; 11:3; 17:6) are connected with suffering and especially martyrdom as the final “witness” to overcoming the world. Christ as the “slain Lamb” (5:6, et al.) is the epitome of such a “witness.” Christ is “true” in 3:7, 14; and 19:11; and God is “true” in 6:10; 15:3; 16:7; 19:2, 9. The Father and the Son in this book are clearly also one in their “truthfulness.” All three terms are in deliberate contrast with the lukewarm Laodiceans, who were neither faithful nor true to Christ and whose witness was virtually nonexistent.

The third title, ἡ ἀρχὴ τῆς κτίσεως τοῦ θεοῦ (*hē archē tēs ktiseōs tou theou*, the ruler of God’s creation) is linked with the “Amen” title due to Isa. 65:17, which follows “the God of truth” with “Behold, I will create new heavens and a new earth.” God’s truthfulness is particularly seen in his control of creation, and here this is also a major attribute of Jesus as the Son of God. Yet it is also well known to the Laodiceans because of the letter written to their sister church, Col. 1:15–16, “He is . . . the firstborn over all creation. For by him all things were created” (see also Prov. 8:22; John 1:3). Also, in Col. 1:18 Jesus is further described as ἀρχή, the “beginning” or preeminent one. Some (Hemer 1986: 184; Johnson; Thomas) think the same heresy in Colosse may have made inroads in Laodicea. Although this cannot be known, and there are no hints of it in this letter, it is possible. A characteristic of the syncretistic Jewish proto-Gnosticism evident in Colosse was a denigration of Jesus as creator of the physical world. Ἀρχή means not only preeminence or ruler but also “source” or “origin,” and that is a likely connotation here. Aune (1997: 256) also notes temporal priority over creation (John 1:2–3, “he was in the beginning with God”). Jesus is the beginning and source of “God’s creation.” Again, this is a message to the Laodiceans. In their wealth and complacency, they thought of themselves as in control; Jesus is telling them that he alone controls creation; he is the very source of their wealth and power.

b. “Strength” (3:15–16)

As in the letter to Sardis, the regular formula for the positive aspects of the church is filled with irony. It is rhetorically powerful, for in effect it declares, “This is the best thing I can say about you.” The statement οὔτε ψυχρὸς εἶ οὔτε ζεστός (*oute psychros eioute zestos*, you are neither hot nor cold)^[7] has been the subject of much speculation down through the centuries. Until the mid-twentieth century, it was moralized as “hot or cold spiritually.” The problem with this was explaining why Jesus would rather they be “cold” spiritually than “lukewarm.” More and more, however, it has been argued that the metaphor stems from Laodicea’s water supply.^[8] Six miles to the north lay Hierapolis, famed for its hot springs. Ten miles to the east lay Colosse, known for its cold, pure drinking water. As Hemer (1986: 187–91) points out, Hierapolis’s streams were so well known for their healing qualities that the city became a major health center, while the cold, life-giving water of Colosse, the only place in the region it was available, may account for its original

settlement. Laodicea had no water supply of its own. It was founded at the junction of trade routes not for its natural but for its commercial and military advantages. When it piped in its water from the hot springs of Denizli (see the introduction to this letter), the water did not have enough time to cool in the aqueducts but arrived “lukewarm” (χλιαρός, *chliaros*). Even today, people in the area place the water in jars to cool. Porter (1987: 144–46) shows that passages from Herodotus and Xenophon indicate that it was the temperature as well as the minerals (see below) that made the water undrinkable. In this sense it is their barren works rather than their spirituality that is the focus, which fits the opening “I know your works.” Of course, there is no radical difference between the two, for its “deeds” showed its spiritual barrenness.

Jesus then says devastatingly, “I wish (ὄλεον, *ophelon*)[9] that you were either cold or hot.” The church should not have matched its water supply. The Laodiceans should have been known for their spiritual healing (like Hierapolis) or their refreshing, life-giving ministry (like Colosse). Instead, as Jesus’ next statement reads, they were “lukewarm.” They were devoid of works and useless to the Lord. As a result,[10] Jesus is μέλλω σε ἐμέσαι ἐκ τοῦ στόματός μου (*mellō se emesai ek tou stomatos mou*, about to vomit you out of my mouth). As already seen, μέλλω indicates imminence (Rev. 2:10; 3:2, 10). Very soon, God’s judgment will fall. The mineral waters were full of calcium carbonate deposits, and the effect of attempting to drink the water would be to vomit (the Greek verb is apparent in the English word “emetic,” referring to a substance that induces vomiting). The water flowing over the cliffs of Hierapolis left spectacular deposits that were visible from Laodicea. Hemer (1986: 187) describes the scenic wonders well: “Hot, sparkling waters rise from deep pools on the city plateau. . . . The cliff . . . is some 300 feet high and extends nearly a mile. Its ever-changing reflections of light and colour are unspeakably beautiful, especially when viewed against the backdrop of the snowy peak of Cadmus.” Yet all this beauty also reminded Laodicea that their water was undrinkable. As such, it provided a perfect metaphor for the shallowness of the church: beautiful outwardly and sickening inwardly! The exalted Christ is challenging them with a powerful rhetorical question, “Don’t you realize that you make me sick?”

c. The Problem and Its Solution (3:17–18)

The basis (causal ὅτι, *hoti*, because) of their lukewarm spirituality and God’s imminent judgment is now given. The Laodiceans were immensely wealthy, and this led to self-sufficiency and complacency, a deadly combination for the Christian. Their problem was, λέγεις ὅτι πλούσιός εἰμι (*legeis hoti plousios eimi*, you say, “I am rich”). Because they were materially “rich,” they assumed that they were also spiritually “rich.” Hemer (1986: 191–95) describes the wealth of Laodicea in great detail. The entire region was rich, and Laodicea was often chosen as the major example of this wealth. Coins from there depict cornucopias, a symbol of wealth and affluence. A man named Hiero bequeathed two thousand talents (several million dollars in today’s terms) to the city, and the Zenonid family was so wealthy and powerful that several of their members achieved the status of royalty (Polemos was even named “king”) under the Romans. The problem, however, was not wealth per se but the smug self-satisfaction it engendered. They also said, πεπλούτηκα καὶ οὐδὲν χρεῖαν ἔχω (*peploutēka kai ouden chreian echō*, I have wealth[11] and need nothing). In A.D. 60 a devastating earthquake leveled their city, but they rebuilt it without help from Rome.[12] Moreover, the buildings that resulted from the reconstruction were remarkable: a gymnasium, a stadium with a semicircular track nine hundred feet long, a triple gate and towers, and several beautiful buildings. In other words, the town was perhaps even more beautiful after the reconstruction. The church was like the city, believing that its material wealth connoted spiritual

wealth.[13]

The problem was, the city had no perceived need for help from Rome, and the church had no perceived need for help from God. Thus the exalted Christ sums up their spiritual dilemma: Οὐκ οἶδας ὅτι σὺ εἶ[14] ὁ ταλαίπωρος καὶ ἐλεεινὸς καὶ πτωχὸς καὶ τυφλὸς καὶ γυμνός (*ouk oidas hoti sy ei ho talaipōros kai eleeeivos kai ptōchos kai typhlos kai gymnos*, you do not realize that you are wretched and pitiful and poor and blind and naked).[15] Note the preponderance of first-person singulars in their claims: “I am . . . I have . . . I have.” Their boastful pride and self-sufficiency rendered them “blind” to the truth. Their lack of “knowledge”[16] led them to miss one essential truth, that they had no spiritual wealth whatsoever. With no external pressure from pagan (like Sardis) or Jewish (like Smyrna or Philadelphia) persecution, with no internal threat from heretical movements (like Ephesus, Pergamum, or Thyatira), they had succumbed to their own affluent lifestyle, and they did not even know it!

Their actual state is described by five successive adjectives that separate naturally into two groups: their general situation (wretched and pitiful) and their specific description (poor, blind, and naked), with the last three stemming from the three areas of Laodicean wealth and leading into 3:18, where the solution centers on their specific problems. Ταλαίπωρος means to be “miserable” or “filled with distress.” The adjective occurs only in Rom. 7:24 (“O wretched man that I am”) elsewhere in the NT, though the verb is used in James 4:9 (“Grieve, mourn, and wail”) and the noun in Rom. 3:16 (“ruin and misery mark their ways”). The obvious connotation is extreme unhappiness. Ἐλεεινός also occurs in only one other place, 1 Cor. 15:19, where it describes how much “to be pitied” the person is who has no “hope” of resurrection. The use here is stronger, however, for it does not say they “deserve pity” but rather that they are “pitiful.” It is similar in meaning to the first adjective, meaning “miserable.” It is used in Dan. 9:23 and 10:11, 19 LXX to translate Daniel’s “misery” and “fear.” Thus the two terms are fairly synonymous, together describing the church as “miserable” rather than powerful. The purpose is not “commiseration” (contra Swete 1911: 61) but challenge. They do not deserve pity but serious counsel, and that is just what they receive in the next verse.

The final three (poor, blind, naked) as before flow out of the church’s background in Laodicea and should be taken as introductory to 3:18. The order in verse 18 is slightly different, reversing the second and third from 3:17, again probably for rhetorical effect. Because of this strong connection, I discuss the three descriptions of verse 17c along with the three details in the spiritual counsel of verse 18. The introductory words of verse 18 are important. Christ begins by saying, συμβουλεύω σοι (*syμβouleuō soi*, I counsel you). The verb means to “give advice” and is used elsewhere only in John 18:14, where Caiaphas “advised” the Jews that “one man should die for the people.” It deliberately understates (using language of advice for a command) the seriousness of the situation: “Let me give you some advice. You should. . . .” The manager in Luke 16:1–8 used his “worldly wealth” to prepare for the future and so was “more shrewd” than “the children of light” because he used his resources for the future and not just the present. So too the Laodiceans should use their “wealth” to “buy” spiritual and not just material rewards. The key here is ἀγοράσαι παρ’ ἐμοῦ (*agorasai par emou*, to buy from me). The commercial nature of the verb is perfect for this city; they had “bought” everything from earthly merchants and so had gone to the wrong “store.” The παρ’ ἐμοῦ is emphatic. Christ is the only proper source of goods that will last, so they have to switch their broker from the marketplace to him.

First, they are actually πτωχός (3:17c) and so need to purchase from Christ χρυσίον πεπυρωμένον ἐκ πυρός (*chrysion pepyrōmenon ek pyros*, gold refined by fire). This builds on the

banking and commerce of the city. They think their accumulated possessions have made them rich (3:17), but they are actually poverty-stricken because they have purchased the wrong things. The idea of “purified” gold also appears in 1 Pet. 1:7 (“gold, which perishes even though refined by fire”) in a context of suffering and may recall Ps. 66:10 (“you refined us like silver”; cf. Zech. 13:9; Isa. 1:25). If so, Swete may be correct (1911: 62) in seeing here a reference to the purifying effect of suffering. If 3:19 is understood to mean that God is going to send trials, it reinforces this connection between purified gold and personal suffering.^[17] The purpose (ἵνα, *hina*, so that) is true wealth. There is a double irony here. They think they are rich but are actually poor; the only way they can be truly wealthy is to “purchase” gold from Jesus. Yet this cannot be bought; it must be accepted as a gift on the basis of faith. Beale (1999: 305) notes the contrast with Smyrna, which was poor in this world but spiritually rich, while Laodicea had all the wealth of this world but was spiritually poverty-stricken.

Second, the city was famed for its glossy black wool,^[18] but these wealthy Christians were actually γυμνός (3:17c). In other words, it is possible to wear Armani suits and Dior dresses but to be “naked” in the eyes of God. The two verbs, περιβάλη καὶ μὴ λανερωθῇ (*peribalē kai mē phanerōthē*, clothed and not revealed) would indicate this. They were clothed in the finest earthly garb but were actually “revealed” or “exposed”^[19] as naked before God. Here there is undoubtedly a reference to the Jewish (contra the Greek) view that nakedness^[20] was αἰσχύνη (*aischynē*, shameful). Also, in the OT nakedness is a symbol of judgment (Isa. 20:1–4; Ezek. 16:36; 23:10), and “shame” means to be disgraced and liable to judgment. When God brings a person to shame in both OT and NT, judgment is the result. As Bultmann (*TDNT* 1:189) has said, “Its primary reference is to the shame brought by the divine judgment.” By contrast, to receive fine new clothing indicated honor, as with Joseph in Gen. 41:42 or Mordecai in Esth. 6:6–11 (Mounce 1998: 110). Throughout Revelation, “white” garments symbolize righteousness (3:4, 5; 6:11; 7:9; 19:14), being washed in the blood of the Lamb (7:13–14), and glory in God’s final kingdom (4:4; 19:14). This is obviously a call for repentance, for realizing the shame of their true spiritual nakedness and purchasing (at no cost!) the gift (Isa. 55:1) of righteousness in Christ.

Third, the Laodiceans were τυφλός (3:17c) in spite of the fame of their medical center and the eye salve it developed.^[21] In other words, their earthly accomplishments were meaningless (in actuality a hindrance) in light of their spiritual blindness. John 9 is the perfect parallel, with its contrast between the man born blind (coming first to physical sight and then to spiritual insight) and the Pharisees (who claimed spiritual sight but were progressively revealed to be blind). The key verse is 9:39, “For judgment I have come into this world, so that the blind will see and those who see will become blind.” The Laodiceans must be “anointed” with God’s “eye salve” (for an excellent discussion of the ancient background to this, see Berger 1985: 174–95) and see themselves as they really are. Attempts to allegorize this eye salve as a new heart (R. Charles 1920: 1.99), fellowship with God (Beasley-Murray 1978: 106), the Word of God (Lenski 1963: 160), the grace and forgiveness of God (Swete 1911: 63; P. Hughes 1990: 67), or the work of the Holy Spirit (Alford 1866: 591; Thomas 1992: 316) go beyond the text. In a sense it is all of these but more than any of them. As before, the meaning is that they must “see” their spiritual blindness, repent, and receive spiritual healing from Christ, who alone is the source of the healing.

d. Solution Developed Further (3:19–20)

The opening statement, ὅσους ἐὰν ἠλῶ (*hosous ean philō*, as many as I love)^[22] is highly unusual in a letter of indictment such as this and is one of the reasons Ramsay did not consider it part of the

epistle (why would Laodicea and Philadelphia be joined as the two Christ explicitly “loves”?).^[23] Yet the purpose is to show the divine love for the defeated as well as for the victorious church. The key is that for those who fail in their walk, divine love must lead to discipline. This generalizes it much further. The combination of ὅσος with ἐάν is used in Greek to indicate in general “all those whom I love” (BAGD 586). Wiarda (1995: 211–12) argues that 3:19–20 is a general truth meant for everyone, not just for the Laodiceans. Thus it demands the repentance of every reader and as such is meant for unbelievers as well as for the church. While this is correct in a sense, it applies this general truth especially for the Laodiceans who are called to get right with the Lord. For the victorious, discipline is a purifying process (John 15:2b); for the weak, it is a wake-up call. The presence of ἐγώ (*egō*, I) at the start of the sentence emphasizes Christ as the subject of the action. As Mounce (1998: 112) paraphrases, “Now my practice is that all those I love, I also correct and discipline.” This passage condenses Prov. 3:11–12, “The LORD disciplines those he loves” (cf. Prov. 13:24; Heb. 12:5–6), and teaches the biblical principle of divine love mandating discipline.

The two verbs, ἐλέγχω καὶ παιδεύω (*elengchō kai paideuō*, I correct and discipline), build on each other. The first refers to a rebuke that intends to point out a problem and convince the person to do something about it. The verb also has an element of reproof and discipline. The second is broader and refers to correction or punishment that has as its goal the training and guidance of the individual or church (cf. 2 Tim. 2:25; Heb. 12:6, 7, 10). The closest parallel to the whole of 3:19a is Heb. 12:4–11, where Prov. 3:11–12 is quoted in a passage that describes God as a “loving” father who must “discipline” his children.

In light of this expression of divine love via discipline, the only possible reaction (οὖν [*oun*, therefore] draws a conclusion) is ζήλευε καὶ μετανόησον (*zēleue kai metanoēson*, be zealous and repent). The present imperative followed by an aorist is interesting. The tendency to see this as a decisive act of repentance followed by continual zeal (Moffatt, Mounce, Thomas) is unlikely, for the order of the verbs is wrong. The zeal precedes rather than follows the repentance. This could well be a Hebraism referring to “zealous repentance.” Most likely the present ζήλευε is stative and means “be zealous”; the progressive force should not be pressed. A “zeal” or eagerness to get right with God must replace the “lukewarm” spirituality that characterized the church. That zeal will be seen in “repentance” (see 2:5, 16, 22; 3:3). The Laodiceans had been blind to their own indifferent spirituality. They had apparently listened to their worldly affluence rather than Christ and had thought material success meant they were right with God (a mistaken theology that paralleled some aspects of ancient Jewish thinking and continues today). Their enthusiasm needed to change focus from self to God, and the only way to do so was to repent.

The loving compassion that in 3:19a was exemplified in discipline is now exemplified in invitation in 3:20. This verse has all too often been misunderstood as an evangelistic call (linked with Holman Hunt’s famous picture, “The Light of the World”) to the unsaved to become Christians.^[24] However, that does not fit the context. Rather, it is a call to a weak church to repent (as in 3:19). At the same time, it is a challenge to every individual (see additional notes) in that church (indeed, in every church; see 3:22) to open themselves up to Christ and invite him into their lives. Finally, it is a promise that if they will do so, Christ will “enter” into deep fellowship with them.

Christ begins here with his characteristically vivid ἰδοὺ (*idou*, behold; see 2:10, 22; 3:8, 9) to draw attention to an important saying. The perfect ἔστηκα (*hestēka*) as always has present force, “I stand,” thus equivalent to καὶ κρούω (*kai krouō*, and knock). Christ is presently at the “door” of each one’s heart, announcing himself and knocking. The picture of Christ standing at the door and

knocking may reflect Song 5:2, where the beloved says, “Listen! My lover is knocking; ‘Open to me . . . my darling.’” Christ’s compassion is nowhere better exemplified than in this image of him as a loving visitor seeking admittance to one’s home.

But there is a condition—“If any hear my voice and open the door.”[25] This emphasizes the importance of personal response. Christ does not force entry but rather makes himself available. The individual must make a decision to allow him to enter. The opening challenge, “hear my voice,” anticipates the call to listen in 3:22 and is the preparatory action. Christ identifies himself at the “door”[26] and calls for a response. The person then responds in repentance and “opens the door” to Christ.

The result is table fellowship. Christ first “will come in to them” and then “will dine with them and they with me.”[27] Note the progression of the metaphor. Jesus arrives at the door as a visitor, identifies himself, and seeks admission. The person must respond, open the door, and allow him admittance. Fellowship results as they share a meal. Spiritually, this denotes a call to repentance and the believer’s response in getting right with Christ. The imagery of “dining” stems from the Near Eastern practice of table fellowship.[28] To share a meal in the ancient world was to share a life. Bartchy (*DJG* 796) says, “When people were estranged, a meal invitation opened the way to reconciliation. Even everyday mealtimes were highly complex events in which social values, boundaries, statuses and hierarchies were reinforced.” Jesus broke many of those boundaries by sharing meals with “sinners” in order to tell the religious establishment that in God’s kingdom all were welcome on the grounds not of acceptability but of response to God’s call (Mark 3:13–17 par.). In so doing, he showed he was a “friend” of sinners (Matt. 11:16–19). Thus the promise here is of acceptance, sharing, and blessing, a deep fellowship with the one offering forgiveness and reconciliation with God.[29] In this there is a foretaste of the final messianic banquet (Rev. 19:6–9; cf. Luke 13:29; 22:29–30). The depth of sharing with Christ attained through spiritual growth of this kind anticipates the total unity to be achieved with God and Christ in eternity (Rev. 21:1–22:5).

e. Challenge to Overcome and Call to Listen (3:21–22)

The syntax of 3:21 resembles 2:17 and 2:26, with an absolute ὁ νικῶν (*ho nikōn*, the one who conquers) followed by a redundant pronoun (δῶσω αὐτῷ, *dōsō autō*, I will give to him). The thrust is the same as in all the letters, a challenge to be a conqueror followed by the promise of an eschatological gift consequent on the perseverance commanded. As in each letter, the gift closely matches the situation and background of Laodicea. Here the gift states what is proleptic in 3:20, that the faithful will share the glory of Christ in eternity. Specifically, they will καθίσαι μετ’ ἐμοῦ ἐν τῷ θρόνῳ μου (*kathisai met’ emou en tō thronō mou*, sit[30] with me on my throne). In Matt. 19:28 Jesus promised that “when the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.” This goes one step further. The conquerors will not just sit on their own thrones but will share Christ’s throne (note the emphasis on μετ’ ἐμοῦ). In Rev. 2:26–27 the conquerors at Thyatira were promised “authority” to rule and destroy the nations; here they are promised a throne. Θρόνος occurs 55 times in the NT, 41 of them in the Apocalypse. Primarily in the book it refers to the “throne of God” (see on 4:2), and indeed part of the purpose of the term here is to provide a textual link between the letters and the throne room vision of chapters 4–5.

Bauckham (1993b: 6) goes so far as to say, “Whereas the others [the seven promises to the conquerors in the letters] are framed in terms appropriate to the church addressed, this last promise seems to be placed last, not because of any special appropriateness to the church at

Laodicea, but rather because it anticipates chapter 5. Christ's own 'conquest' and his consequent enthronement with his Father in heaven is what John sees announced and celebrated in chapter 5." Bauckham is correct regarding the importance of this as a transition to the throne room vision of chapters 4–5 but wrong about its appropriateness to Laodicea. As Hemer (1986: 205–6) shows, in 40 B.C. the orator Zeno and his son Polemos stopped an invader of Asia in his tracks, and a grateful Rome made Polemos first ruler of Cilicia and then king of Pontus. Several of his sons became kings in turn, and Laodicea was justly proud of this. The promise here is that if they will repent and persevere, any member of the church can inherit an eternal "throne," which indeed is the result in 20:4 and 22:5, where the victorious saints sit on thrones and reign for eternity.

There is a three-stage development in the throne theology of the Bible. In the OT it is Yahweh who sits on the throne in majesty and judgment. In the Gospels Jesus as Son of Man partakes of God's throne, also in majesty and judgment (Matt. 19:28; 25:31–46). The same is true in the Apocalypse. In chapter 4 Yahweh is on his glorious throne, and in chapter 5 Jesus in his redemptive work is enthroned with him. Finally, in Matt. 19:28 (par. Luke 22:29, 30); 1 Cor. 6:2; 2 Tim. 2:12a, as well as in Rev. 2:26–27; 3:21; and 20:4, the victorious saints also share in the throne of glory and judgment. The "throne" of the saints will begin with the defeat of the forces of evil at Armageddon (2:26–27 = 17:14; 19:14), continue in the millennial reign (20:4), and be completed in eternity (3:21). Jesus is the model for the throne victory of the saints, as is seen in ὥς καὶ ἐγὼ ἐνίκησα καὶ ἐκάθισα μετὰ τοῦ πατρός μου ἐν τῷ θρόνῳ αὐτοῦ (*hōs kagō enikēsa kai ekathisa meta tou patros mou en tō thronō autou*, as I also conquered and sat^[31] with my Father on his throne). The idea of "sitting with my Father" is reminiscent of Ps. 110:1, where God promises, "Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet" (interpreted messianically by many in the 1st century).

This is a major NT motif on the victory of Christ (Matt. 22:44; Acts 2:34–35; Eph. 1:20; Heb. 8:1; 10:12–13; 12:2). The theme of *Christus Victor* is an essential component of NT theology. The exorcisms of Jesus were actually displays of his victory over Satan as taught in Mark 3:27 and parallels regarding Satan as the strong man bound in his house. At the cross Satan was defeated utterly, as stated in Col. 2:15, "And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross." At that time Jesus "went and preached to the spirits in prison" that they had been defeated (1 Pet. 3:19), and God "exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name" (Phil. 2:9). Jesus' "victory" was the basis of his throne,^[32] and the victory of the saints as they overcome the world and its evil is the basis of their throne.

The "call to listen" (3:22) again anchors the challenge and calls on the reader to "listen" and "obey." It is the "Spirit" speaking and not just John's message, and it is intended as a warning to all "churches" and not just to Laodicea. This message is not to be taken lightly; for as verse 21 shows, eternity itself is at stake.

Summary and Contextualization

The Laodicean church is unfortunately a perfect parallel for some of the greatest problems in the church at the start of the twenty-first century, especially in the West and parts of the Far East. Affluence has made us "lukewarm," for we have become self-satisfied and interpret our trappings of "success" (big churches, beautiful buildings, huge budgets) as God's blessings. We too easily forget that God wants our hearts and not just our numbers. As some of the popular

speakers, writers, and musicians have learned, it is possible to get wealthy from ministry, let alone from secular business dealings. When that happens, it is very difficult to make God first in our lives and ministries. We “work” but do not worship. Many other Christians have made God just another line item on their portfolio. They have insurance for every contingency, and Christianity is little more than “eternity insurance.” Pity them when they stand before the throne! The point of the Laodicean letter is to warn us that God demands our best. If worldly possessions are more important than he is (like the “rich young ruler” of Mark 10:17–31 par.), we too will “make Christ sick.” The answer is to “repent” and gain “victory” over material and earth-centered pursuits. We need to serve him and let him glorify us in his own time, for he will. As Jesus said often, we will only be great in the kingdom if we make ourselves least on earth. If we live for wealth now, we will have “already received our comfort” (Luke 6:24) and have nothing in eternity. Do we want to be “saved . . . only as one escaping through the flames” (1 Cor. 3:11–15)?

Additional Notes

3:14. ὁ Ἀμὴν: L. Silberman (1963) reinterprets the “Amen” title on the basis of a Jewish midrash of Prov. 8:22 in Genesis Rabbah 1.1, translating the title as “Master Workman.” In this sense Jesus was God’s adviser in creation, the one who did the work. While interesting, this does not fit the context well. The “truthfulness” of Jesus is more likely.

3:15–16. οὔτε ζεστός οὔτε ψυχρός: While most recent commentators have explained the “hot or cold” metaphor by Laodicea’s problematic water supply (Hemer 1986: 186–91; Mounce; Sweet; Chilton; Krodel; Wall; Harrington; Keener; Giesen; Beale; Aune), not all have done so. Thomas (1992: 305–7) provides the most extensive critique: “The cold-hot combination can hardly be intended as another way of saying lukewarm because in the very next breath Christ expresses His desire that the readers be one or the other (3:15b).” Since the two are intended to be separate, they should not be combined. Further, he argues, the other letters deal with internal spiritual qualities rather than external deeds, so why would John switch here? He agrees with those (Alford, Swete, Lohmeyer, Caird, Walvoord, Morris, Beasley-Murray) who say the “cold” refers to the unbeliever and that John is saying God prefers outright rejection to halfhearted Christianity. This is a plausible position, and I hardly want to give the impression that the backgrounds approach is the only viable one. Yet which provides the best solution? Thomas’s arguments are not conclusive. I do not combine “hot” and “cold,” nor would I dichotomize spiritual qualities from works so radically. Michaels (1997: 88) also disagrees with the water supply metaphor on the grounds that many readers outside Laodicea would not be aware of this problem and that the metaphor makes sense as is. This is all true, but the normal rule in using background information is to ascertain whether it fits the period in question and whether it makes more sense than other solutions. When we apply the normal criteria for deciding the viability of a backgrounds approach (reliability of the data, viability in the scriptural context, cohesiveness of the explanation), this fits as well as any backgrounds approach I have seen (e.g., explanations of parables or passages like the “armor of God” in Eph. 6). If Ramsay’s and Hemer’s general approach to these letters as built on local background is correct (and I believe it is), then the use of Laodicea’s water supply to strengthen the metaphor is the most probable explanation of this text.

3:20. Two issues are important to this verse: Is it individual or corporate in thrust, and is it present fellowship or future dining with the Lord in the eternal kingdom? Most tend to make the two a single issue, but they are separate. It is certainly possible to take a personal/eschatological or a corporate/present position on this verse. The first issue centers on whether **ἐάν τις** introduces a personal thrust within the corporate body or provides another example of a generic pronoun referring to the church as a whole. Many (e.g., Hemer 1986: 204, 207; Mounce; Morris; Beasley-Murray; Sweet) argue for an individualistic thrust on the basis of the parallel “the one who conquers” in each of the letters. **Τίς** appears only here in the letters, but elsewhere in the book it is always singular and in every case is individualistic (5:2; 6:17; 11:5; 13:9, 10, 17; 14:9, 11; 15:4; 18:18; 20:15; 22:18, 19). Therefore it is natural to suppose that here as well it is individualistic and personal.

On the second issue, several (Swete, Beckwith, Kiddle, Roloff, Thomas) note close parallels with Jesus’ teaching on his return, in particular the parable of the servants waiting for their master (Luke 12:35–38, with the master knocking, the servants opening the door, and the reward) and the eucharistic saying in Luke 22:29–30 (on eating and drinking with Christ in the eternal kingdom). While the eschatological view is certainly viable, it is better to follow those (R. Charles; Hemer 1986: 206–7; Mounce; Beasley-Murray; Chilton; Beale) who see this as present fellowship. The picture of table fellowship in the kingdom is a possible parallel, but other uses of table fellowship in the NT provide better parallels for the context here, as we will see. This fellowship may well anticipate the future messianic banquet, but it cannot be restricted to that event. It is more likely that this carries on the impact of verse 19. If anyone “repents” and “opens the door” to Christ, present fellowship will be the result.

- I. Prologue (1:1–8)
- II. Churches Addressed (1:9–3:22)
- III. God in Majesty and Judgment (4:1–16:21)
- IV. Final Judgment at the Arrival of the Eschaton (17:1–20:15)
- V. New Heaven and New Earth (21:1–22:5)
- VI. Epilogue (22:6–21)

III. God in Majesty and Judgment (4:1–16:21)

In one sense, 4:1–5:14 is the third introductory section (with 1:9–20; 2:1–3:22) preparing the reader for the major section of the book dealing with the seals, trumpets, and bowls (chaps. 6–16). This makes sense for two reasons: (1) Like the letters to the seven churches, scenes of these two chapters are repeated often in chapters 6–16. (2) These three preparatory sections would parallel the three closing sections of the book (17:1–19:5; 19:6–20:15; 21:1–22:5), producing the type of chiasm often found in Scripture. However, 4:1–2 makes it difficult to make this the primary structure of the book. In verse 1 John writes that the message comes from “the voice I had first heard speaking to me like a trumpet,” a clear reference to 1:9, with “a voice like a loud trumpet” introducing the first vision. It seems 4:1–2 begins the second vision of the book (see Aune 1997: 275, who sees 4:1–2a introducing both chaps. 4–6 and chaps. 4–22). Also, *ἐν πνεύματι* (*en pneumatī*, in the Spirit) occurs in 1:10 and further enhances the view that this is a second beginning. Moreover, in 4:1 a “door standing open in heaven” leads into the first heavenly scene. Finally, there is a natural transition from chapter 5, where Jesus is seen as “worthy” to open the seven seals, to chapter 6, where he actually opens the seals. In other words, 4:1–5:14 begins the section on the seals, trumpets, and bowls rather than ending the introductory section.

Nevertheless, there is still a close connection between the seven letters and the throne room vision. As already noted, the promise to the conquerors that they will share the “throne” of Christ in 3:21 pointed forward to chapters 4–5. Indeed, chapter 5 is in some sense a commentary on 3:21b, “just as I overcame and sat with my Father on his throne.” Moreover, as Aune (1983) has pointed out, the throne room vision of chapter 4 is in deliberate contrast with the “glory” of Caesar’s throne and so is a response to the imperial cult, which was a major source of persecution for the seven churches and one of the key issues in the book as a whole. The details of the scene—the acclamation, the crowns, the worship of the sovereign, the rows of officials—all were seen in Caesar’s court. Here, only God is truly worthy of this. The message to the cult movements alluded to in 2:2, 6, 14–16, 20–23, and to the Christians tempted to succumb to pagan pressure is that Caesar’s power and glory are nothing compared to God’s. He alone is worthy of allegiance and worship.

III. God in Majesty and Judgment (4:1–16:21)

► A. God's Sovereignty in Judgment (4:1–11:19)

B. Great Conflict between God and the Forces of Evil (12:1–16:21)

A. God's Sovereignty in Judgment (4:1–11:19)

There is a further contrast within 4:1–16:21, for it breaks naturally into two sections, 4:1–11:19 (beginning with the throne scene centering on the Father and the Son) and 12:1–16:21 (beginning with the conflict scene centering on the false trinity—the dragon, beast, and false prophet). In 4:1 a “door stands open in heaven,” and in 12:1 “a great and wondrous sign appears in heaven.” Throughout chapters 4–5 God and the Lamb are worshiped, while in 13:4, 8, 12, 14–15, the beast is worshiped by his followers. The throne of God (4:2–10; 5:6–7, 11–13) is contrasted to the throne of the dragon (13:2). The great battle between God and the forces of evil dominates this section, but from the beginning the outcome is sure. As 12:12 says, the dragon goes out “filled with fury, because he knows his time is short.” The sovereignty of God is absolute. Still the battle is terrible, for it is also between the “heaven-dwellers” (the saints) and the “earth-dwellers” (those who follow the beast). The people of God will undergo terrible persecution from the evil powers, but the pagans^[1] will undergo terrible outpourings of judgment from God. Here again there is contrast. The purpose of the persecution is to destroy the people of God, but the purpose of the judgment is to call the nations to repentance (9:20–21; 14:6–7; 15:4; 16:9, 11).

1. Throne Room Vision—God and the Lamb in Heaven (4:1–5:14)

The unifying theme of these chapters is certainly the “throne” (4:2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 9, 10; 5:1, 6, 7, 11, 13). Hurtado (1985: 120) says that chapters 4–5 constitute “two closely related scenes in one unified vision of God’s throne.” While in 1:11 John is told to “write” and send the message to the seven churches, in 4:1 he is told to “come up” to heaven and see what is to take place. When he arrives, he sees “a throne in heaven,” and this dominates the next two chapters, indeed the rest of the book. In chapter 4 the sovereignty and majesty of God is central, and worship predominates. In chapter 5 the Lamb takes the spotlight and stands “in the center of the throne” (5:6). The worship (5:9, 12) shifts to him, and the final scene of worship celebrates the unity of the two figures (5:13–14). Moreover, the hymns progress from the living creatures (4:8), to the elders (4:10–11), to both groups together (5:8–9), to the myriad angels (5:11–12), to “every creature” (5:13). The progression is powerful: first in groups and then finally as the greatest choir ever assembled, all creation, joins in worship of the Godhead. The imagery is drawn from a combination of Ezek. 1 (the coming of the enthroned God in a windstorm) and Isa. 6 (God on his throne in his temple). These are put together in a picture of the throne room that dominates the rest of the book and prepares for everything that follows.

This has led many scholars to theorize that the scene originated in early Christian liturgical patterns as derived themselves from synagogue liturgy. For instance, Prigent (1964: 46–79) argues that the paschal imagery of the synagogue and of John’s church guided the themes dealing with God the creator, the Law with God as its author, thanksgiving for deliverance (the exodus theme dealing with the paschal lamb), and the “new song” rejoicing in divine redemption (see Beale 1999: 313). Affinities with early liturgical forms have especially been seen in the hymns of chapters 4–5, viewed as following the pattern of early Christian worship (Mowry 1952; O’Rourke 1968; Feuillet 1975), and the patterns of prostration and recognition of the “worthiness” of God and the Lamb (L. Thompson 1990: 56–59). While the presence of worship is definitely a feature of this section, it is speculative to see this as a duplicate of Jewish or early Christian patterns. It is much closer to Isa. 6, Ezek. 1, and Dan. 7 than to synagogue patterns (so also Beale 1999: 312–16).

Furthermore, chapter 4 celebrates the God of creation and chapter 5 the God of redemption (so Beasley-Murray 1978: 108–9). First, God is seated in splendor on his throne, far above earth’s petty rulers, obviously in control of his world and its history. As 1:4, 8 say, he “was, and is, and is to come.” He alone is “Lord God Almighty” (4:8) and “our Lord and God” (4:11a). He alone “created all things” and gave them life (4:11b). Second, only God and the Lamb are “worthy” because God is “creator” (4:11) and the Lamb “has triumphed” (5:2–5), and this victory was achieved by his sacrificial death as the “slain Lamb” (5:6, 9, 12). The Father and the Son are one not only by the throne theme but also by the unity of creation and redemption. It is important to realize that the victory of the Lamb and his exaltation to a place of authority occurs not at the end of the book but has already been achieved at the cross. Even here it is celebrated and not merely proclaimed. The victory was won at the cross, and the eschaton is the final result of that victory which has already taken place. O’Donovan (1986: 71) sees in these chapters a “tableau of creation” as the throne is “surrounded by the symbolic representatives of the created order.” But the scroll, representing history and the beauty of the created order, is impugned by world history. Thus the cross (the slain Lamb) overcomes and “can offer human existence the cosmic meaning which it demands. It provides the justification of creation in history.”

a. God on His Throne (4:1–11)

The throne room scene is a kaleidoscope of OT images, with no single one dominant. Perhaps the most pervasive image is that of Ezek. 1:4–28, the “throne in a whirlwind” vision, but important parallels are also found with the throne room of Isa. 6:1–4 and the throne scene of Dan. 7:9–10. In addition, there is creation imagery drawn from Ezek. 1 and perhaps Gen. 1, a temple connection (the ark-throne, brazen “sea,” the liturgy, and incense), and a parallel with the imperial court. This chapter is reflected often in the rest of the book.^[1] The throne of God dominates the book. The elders function as interpreters of the visions in 5:5 and 7:13–17, and they sing hymns to God in 4:10–11; 5:8–10; 11:16–18; and 19:4. One of the four living creatures inaugurates the seals (6:1), and another gives the seven bowls of wrath to the angels to be poured out on the earth (15:7). In short, the throne room of chapter 4 is at the center of the imagery in the book.

- i. Upward call (4:1)
- ii. God on his throne (4:2–3)
- iii. Twenty-four elders around the throne (4:4)
- iv. Celestial phenomena from the throne (4:5–6a)
- v. Four living beings (4:6b–8a)
- vi. Worship of the celestial beings (4:8b–11)

Exegesis and Exposition

¹After these things I looked, and behold, I saw a door standing open in heaven, and the first voice that I heard was like a trumpet speaking with me and saying, “Come up here, and I will show what must happen after this.” ²At once I was in the Spirit, and behold there was a throne located in heaven, and someone sitting on it. ³The one sitting on it had the appearance of jasper and carnelian, and a rainbow with the appearance of an emerald encircled the throne. ⁴Surrounding the throne were twenty-four thrones, and twenty-four elders sat on the thrones, clothed in white garments and having golden crowns on their heads. ⁵From the throne were proceeding flashes of lightning, the roar of the storm, and peals of thunder. Ablaze in front of the throne were seven lamps that are the sevenfold Spirit of God. ⁶Also in front of the throne was something like a sea of glass, crystal clear.

In the middle of the throne, encircling it, were four living beings, full of eyes in front and behind. ⁷The first living being was like a lion, the second like an ox, the third had a face like “a man,” and the fourth like a flying eagle. ⁸Each of the four living beings had six wings and was full of eyes around and within.

Day and night they never cease saying,
“Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty,
who was and is and is to come.”

⁹When the living creatures give honor, glory, and thanks to the one who sits on the throne and who lives forever and ever, ¹⁰the twenty-four elders fall down before the one who sits on the throne and worship the one who lives forever and ever. Then they cast their crowns before the throne, saying,

¹¹“You are worthy, our Lord and God,
to receive glory and honor and power,
because you created all things,
and on the basis of your will “they exist” and were created.”

i. Upward Call (4:1)

The introductory *μετὰ ταῦτα εἶδον* (*meta tauta eidon*, after these things I looked) introduces a new vision. It is used often in the book (7:1, 9; 15:5; 18:1) to begin a new section and emphasizes the progression of the narrative. *Μετὰ ταῦτα* most likely refers to the whole vision of 1:10–3:22. John

first saw Christ walking among the lampstands, and now he sees the throne room itself. There is no indication of time, and it is impossible to know if there was a period between the visions. The movement is rhetorical rather than temporal, as we enter a new phase of the book. Εἶδον καὶ ἰδοῦ (*eidon kai idou*, I looked and behold) is used at the beginning of sections (6:2, 5, 8; 14:1, 14) to indicate an important part of the vision, in this case the door standing open in heaven.

Two apocalyptic images are combined, the door and the open heaven. Note that this does not say that all heaven is now open, for that will occur only at the end of history, at the eschaton. Rather, a θύρα (*thyra*, door) to heaven is open, and only John is invited to enter. The door to heaven is an occasional apocalyptic symbol (3 Macc. 6:18; 1 Enoch 14.10–11; 15.14; 104.2; T. Levi 5.1; cf. also Gen. 28:17; Ps. 78:23) for access to God as well as to eternal bliss. The “door to heaven” occurs only here in the NT, but a parallel concept occurs in the “narrow gate” (Luke 13:24–25, also θύρα) to salvation in Jesus’ teaching. This door is ἡνεωγμένη ἐν τῷ οὐρανῷ (*ēneōgmenē en tō ouranō*, opened in heaven), with the perfect participle possibly indicating the door had already been opened (so Swete, Mounce, Thomas) but just as likely (cf. 1 Pet. 1:9) purely adjectival, “open in heaven.” The idea of “heaven opened” is more frequent in the NT (Matt. 3:16; John 1:51; Acts 7:56; 10:11; 2 Cor. 12:1–4) and reverses the biblical teaching of a closed heaven due to the world’s sin (Luke 4:25; James 5:17–18; Rev. 11:6, all commenting on the three-and-a-half-year drought in the time of Elijah in 1 Kings 17).^[2] At Jesus’ baptism (Matt. 3:16) the heavens were split open, and in John 1:51 Jesus said that they remain open to him. The message is that in Christ’s ministry the eschaton has begun, the kingdom has arrived. Here in Rev. 4:1 the final stages of the consummation are announced. In Revelation the open heaven continues as a message of hope for the beleaguered believers (8:1ff.; 11:19; 12:10; 15:5; 19:11).

It is interesting that of the 274 NT occurrences of “heaven,” 91 are in the plural (reflecting the Jewish conception of multiple heavens found in 2 Cor. 12:2), while of the 52 uses in Revelation, only one is plural (12:2), and that may have been influenced by Isa. 44:23 (so R. Charles, Mounce, Thomas). Since heaven is the dwelling place of God and the final home of the victorious saints (the “new heaven” of 21:1a), John is uninterested in the concept of multiple heavens. The old “heaven” with its conflict and evil (12:7–9, 12) will be vanquished (21:1b) and replaced with the new, final “heaven” filled with the presence of God among his people.

The third apocalyptic image is that of the “voice like a trumpet,” looking back to 1:10 and introducing the second vision. As in 1:10–20, this too is probably the voice of Christ. As Beasley-Murray (1978: 111–12) points out, there is no contradiction in Jesus inviting John to ascend and see a vision of God in heaven. While the NIV translates this as a reference back to the first voice (“the voice I had first heard speaking to me like a trumpet”), the word order makes it more likely that it describes the voice here (“and the first voice I heard speaking with me like a trumpet said . . .”). The “voice like a trumpet” is the apocalyptic announcement of the end-time events (see on 1:10), preparing first for the appearance of the “one like a son of man” and second for the throne room vision.

The seer is first called^[3] up to heaven. Ἀνάβα ὧδε (*anaba hōde*, come up here) calls on John to “ascend” to heaven. Some commentators (e.g., Roloff 1993: 68; Krodel 1989: 154) connect this with the “heavenly journey of the soul,” the bodiless, ecstatic release of the soul for a visionary trip to heaven in apocalyptic imagery (1 Enoch 70–73; 81; 2 Cor. 12:2). Certainly John sees the vision ἐν πνεύματι (*en pneumati*, in the spirit, 4:2), but there is no necessary “release of the soul,” and the journey is visionary. Still, the apocalyptic journey to heaven is certainly intended. The tour of heaven is quite frequent in apocalyptic literature (1 Enoch 1–36; As. Mos. 4; 2 Bar. 22), always

emphasizing the presence of God and the eschatological power of the scene.

In the seven letters the eschatological promise was preceded by “I will give you.” Here it is preceded by “I will show you” (δείξω σοι, *deixō soi*). As Schneider (*EDNT* 1:280–81) points out, the term sometimes refers to a logical “demonstration” or proof of a truth, but here, as often in John and the Apocalypse, it refers to a visual “revelation” or “unveiling” of divine reality (John 5:20; 14:8; Rev. 1:1; 17:1; 21:9–10; 22:6–8). In fact, ἃ δεῖ γενέσθαι (*ha deigenesthai*, what must take place) occurs in 1:1; 4:1; and 22:6 (cf. 1:19, “what is about to take place”) as the primary revelation given. Note the emphatic “must” of divine necessity. God once more is seen as in sovereign control of history, determining the progress of events according to his divine plan. The mention of things that “must take place” obviously points beyond the throne room vision of chapters 4–5 to the end-time events of chapters 6 and following (as also in 1:1, 19).

ii. God on His Throne (4:2–3)

“At once” (εὐθέως, *eutheōs*; the text is very graphic) John is ἐν πνεύματι (*en pneumati*, in the Spirit). As stated in 1:10, this phrase points to a Holy Spirit–sent visionary experience in which God reveals his mysteries. John once again joins the prophets and the apocalyptic seers as the voice of God (Ezek. 11:1–5; Amos 3:7).^[4] The second vision is like the first but with one important difference: in 1:10–11 John stayed on Patmos, while here he is caught up to heaven itself. For the second time in two verses the text stresses ἐν τῷ οὐρανῷ (*en tō ouranō*, in heaven). The door is “in heaven,” and now it opens fully to reveal a vast throne room “in heaven.” As in Isa. 6, God is at center stage. John’s characteristic ἰδοὺ (*idou*, behold; see 1:7, 18; 2:10, 22; 3:8, 9, 20) draws the reader’s attention to the action. There he sees that a “throne” ἔκειτο (*ekeito*, was located) in the midst of heaven.^[5] As said in 3:21, θρόνος (*thronos*, throne) is a major emphasis in this book, contrasting the “throne of God” with the “throne” of Satan (12:5 contra 13:2; cf. 2:13; 16:10) and probably in this chapter with the throne of Caesar. The term occurs thirteen times in this short chapter alone. Originally a chair for honored guests, the “throne” became a symbol for the sovereign majesty of the king. It signified both rule and judgment (the bema; see Schmitz, *TDNT* 3:160–61).

Only here in the NT is the throne of God described. The background can be found in Isa. 6:1–4 and especially Ezek. 1:26–28. From Isa. 6 comes the emphasis on the Lord “seated on a throne, high and exalted, and the train of his robe filled the temple” (see Rev. 1:1), as well as the presence of angelic beings (“seraphim”). From Ezek. 1 come the four living creatures, the vault of heaven, and the transcendent splendor of the throne. Unlike Isaiah, however, here the throne is in heaven rather than the temple (though there is temple imagery associated with the throne in Rev. 7:15; 8:3), and unlike Ezekiel it is fixed rather than moving like a whirlwind. This is the culmination of all throne scenes in the Bible.

As John looks, he sees ἐπὶ τὸν θρόνον^[6] καθήμενος (*epi ton thronon kathēmenos*, [someone] sitting on the throne). In the terse Greek so often found in this book, John refuses to name the figure “on the throne” and even omits the pronoun. The reader is to know who sits enthroned there. God is described as “sitting on the throne” often in the book (4:2, 3, 9, 10; 5:1, 7, 13; 6:16; 7:10, 15; 19:4; 20:11; 21:5), and the imagery suggests the supreme potentate who sits in final judgment upon the world. Again, the contrast with Caesar is intended (see Aune 1983: 8–9). Rather than name him, John describes him with apocalyptic symbols (Aune 1997: 284 calls this “a circumlocution for the name of God”). While Ezekiel describes God as having “a figure like that of a man” (1:26), John avoids all anthropomorphic language. Instead, he uses the brilliant colors of precious jewels to describe him.

The Bible often describes God as light (Ps. 18:12; 104:2; 1 Tim. 6:16; 1 John 1:5, 7), and three translucent stones are used here to describe him. First, he is ὁμοιος ὁράσει λίθῳ ἰάσπιδι (*homoios horasei lithō iaspidi*, similar in appearance to a jasper stone). The jasper was an opaque jewel, often reddish in color but at times green, brown, blue, yellow, or white. On the basis of Rev. 21:11 (“a precious stone like jasper that shines like crystal”), this may have been an opal or perhaps even a diamond (BAGD 368). Beale (1999: 321) points out that it is in a sense a stone that summarizes the other jewels of the book, since it also makes up the wall of the city of God (21:18) and heads the list of the twelve foundation stones of 21:19–20. It is especially associated with the glory of God (21:11). Second, he is described as σαρδίῳ (*sardiō*, a carnelian), a fiery red stone very popular in the ancient world and possibly the basis for the name “Sardis.” Third, ἴρις κυκλόθεν τοῦ θρόνου ὁμοιος ὁράσει σμαραγδίνῳ (*iris kyklothen tou thronou homoios horasei smaragdinō*, a rainbow encircled the throne, like an emerald). The “rainbow” (ἴρις) is an unusual term used only here and in 10:1 in the Greek Bible and can mean either a rainbow or a halo. Nearly all agree that the rainbow is meant (contra Lohse 1960: 38), but it has an unusual shape in that it “encircles the throne.” This may explain the term ἴρις (the LXX uses τόξον [*toxon*] for “rainbow”), for this rainbow has the shape of a halo of light surrounding the throne. The imagery combines the rainbow as typifying the radiant light surrounding God in Ezek. 1:28^[7] and the Noahic covenant of Gen. 9:13–17 (so Bauckham 1993a: 51–52). The promise never again to destroy the earth with water prepares for the judgment theme in the rest of the book (note the flood imagery of Rev. 11:18).^[8] The description of the rainbow as “like an emerald” can have two implications. The σμαράγδινος can be a bright green precious stone or a transparent rock crystal that could serve as a prism and yield a “rainbow” of colors. Beasley-Murray (1978: 113) suggests the latter as best fitting the Noahic imagery. Either way, the imagery is that of the glory surrounding God on his throne.

There is great debate regarding the interpretation of such images. Most (Beckwith, Ladd, Mounce, Johnson, Chilton, Krodel, Giesen, Aune) believe that the jewels here (and in other places like 21:19–20) do not have individual significance but are meant to be taken together. Others (Walvoord, Thomas) believe they do have separate significance, seeing the jasper as majesty or holiness, the carnelian as wrath or judgment, and the emerald as the grace and mercy of God. While the latter is possible, it seems more likely that they are drawn from OT combinations of similar stones. Three possibilities suggest themselves: First in Ezek. 28:13 they are part of a list describing the king of Tyre: “Every precious stone adorned you: carnelian . . . emerald . . . jasper. . . .” Second, in Exod. 28:17–21 they are part of the twelve jewels in the breastplate of the high priest, with each representing one of the twelve tribes (e.g., jasper = Benjamin; carnelian = Reuben; emerald = Judah). Third, the brilliant colors of the stones together might simply represent the resplendence of God. While the Ezekiel and Exodus references are provocative, little in this context suggests such a thing, and the idea of God dwelling “in unapproachable light” (1 Tim. 6:16) may well provide the best explanation. As Aune (1997: 285) points out, John uses three stones also found in the New Jerusalem: jasper (4:3; 21:11, 18, 19), carnelian (4:3; 21:20), and crystal (4:6; 22:1). Thus the majesty of God and the splendor of the New Jerusalem are linked.

iii. Twenty-Four Elders Around the Throne (4:4)

There is a chiastic arrangement in the rest of the chapter, with the elders (4:4–6a) followed by the living creatures (4:6b–8), and then the songs of the living creatures (4:8b) and the elders (4:11) in reverse order. This begins with the suggestive image of “twenty-four thrones” surrounding the throne of God, on which there are “twenty-four elders seated.” A key term is κυκλόθεν (*kyklothen*,

surrounding, encircling), which appears in 4:3, 4, 8 (and nowhere else in the NT). The picture is that of concentric circles, with the rainbow immediately “around” the throne, then the four living creatures (who are “in the center around [the cognate **κύκλω**, *kyklō*] the throne”), and finally the twenty-four elders (this is the order in 5:6). There may be a hierarchical order here, with the central figures (closer to the throne) presented last. These concentric circles around the throne are the core of the vision and depict glory and worship.

There is great debate as to the identification of the twenty-four elders—are they human or heavenly figures? The basis of the decision is their description in 4:4, “clothed in white garments” with “crowns of gold^[9] on their heads.” Those who argue for the elders as human beings (Swete, Alford, Walvoord, Feuillet, Sweet, Kraft, Ford, Wall, McDonald, Harrington) state that angels are not called elders, nor do they wear crowns or sit on thrones in the Bible. Moreover, white clothing in Revelation is always worn by the saints (3:4–5, 18; 6:11; 7:9, 13; 19:14). Within this position several views are posited. The “twenty-four elders” could be (1) the twelve patriarchs (OT) and twelve apostles (NT), thus the whole people of God (see 21:12–14, with the names of the twelve tribes and the twelve apostles on the gates and foundations of the New Jerusalem); (2) the great saints of the OT seen as preceding the NT saints;^[10] (3) the whole community built on the twenty-four orders of the priesthood in 1 Chron. 24:4–5; (4) the church as the true Israel, the heavenly counterpart of all “victors” (**στéλανος** as the victor’s wreath rather than the ruler’s crown) who remain true to God; or (5) a heavenly court sitting on thrones of judgment (fulfilling 3:21).^[11]

However, many others (Beckwith, R. Charles, Moffatt, Ladd, Beasley-Murray, Morris, Mounce, Johnson, Roloff, Krodel, Thomas) believe these are angelic figures. There are no other human beings in chapter 4, and in Isa. 24:23 angels might be called “elders” (it is debated whether they are angels or the elders of Israel). In Ps. 89:7 (cf. 1 Kings 22:19; Job 15:8) God sits in the “council of his holy ones” (= angels). Moreover, angels are called “thrones or powers or rulers or authorities” in Col. 1:16 (cf. Eph. 3:10; 6:12), and they wear white in Matt. 28:3; John 20:12; Acts 1:10. The thrones and golden crowns could refer to their royal function under God similar to the way first-century kings were subject to the Roman emperor.

The key is the function of the **πρεσβύτεροι** (*presbyteroi*, elders) in the book. Their primary role is that of worship (5:14; 11:16; 19:4) and praise (4:11; 5:9–10; 11:17–18; 14:3; 19:4). In addition, they serve as intermediaries and interpreters (5:5; 7:13–17). A close examination of these texts shows a distinct differentiation between the elders and the saints. In 5:8 they hold golden bowls that contain the prayers of the saints; in 7:13–14 one of them explains who the victorious saints are; in 11:18 they thank God for rewarding the saints; in 14:3 the 144,000 sing “a new song before the throne and before the four living creatures and the elders”; and in 19:4 they join the heavenly chorus. The elders are seated on thrones (4:4; 11:16), while the saints stand before the throne (7:9). From this evidence it is more likely that these are heavenly beings who reign with God and are part of the retinue surrounding his throne. Moreover, since “all the angels” also stand before the throne (7:11), these must be celestial beings with a ruling function.

As with the living creatures (v. 8), we do not know what type of heavenly being they are, only that they form part of the heavenly council. Their “white garments” signify purity and holiness (perhaps part of their priestly function in presenting the prayers of his saints and in their leading worship) and the “golden crowns” their royal status. The number “twenty-four” could refer to the priestly orders if that function is being highlighted here, or to the patriarchs and apostles if they are the counterpart of the church on earth. Although neither is certain, a priestly role would fit their function as leaders of heavenly worship and as presenting the prayers of the saints to God

(5:8; 8:3–4). Beale (1999: 322) sees a link between the angelic beings and the saints; they symbolize the twelve tribes and twelve apostles, thus the redeemed of both Testaments. While the symbolic function of angels is probably correct, the twenty-four priestly orders make better sense (so also Aune 1997: 289), thus giving the angels a priestly function. Hurtado (1985: 120) believes that these angels build on the priestly orders and so represent the elect before God. On the whole, I conclude that the elders were a ruling class of heavenly beings who encircled the throne and led heavenly praise, thus exhibiting a priestly role.

iv. Celestial Phenomena from the Throne (4:5–6a)

Further description of the throne room combines several OT metaphors, from Sinai to the temple to creation itself, with 4:4 centered on that which was “around the throne,” 4:5a on that which ἐκ τοῦ θρόνου ἐκπορεύονται^[12] (*ek tou thronou ekporeuontai*, proceeds from the throne), and 4:5b–6a on that which is “before the throne.” Giblin (1998: 501–2) sees a chiasm in 4:2b–11 with verses 5a–6a the center of the section (A 2b–3; B 4; C 5a–6a; B’ 6b–7; A’ 8–11; with A/A’ = the enthroned one; B/B’ = background—the elders and the living creatures). Thus 4:5–6a is the core of the chapter. In 4:5a the cognate ἐκ is emphasized; the lightning and thunder come “out of” the throne itself. In other words, they stem from the work of God himself. Ἀστραπαὶ καὶ ἰωναὶ καὶ βρονταί (*astrapai kai phōnai kai brontai*, lightnings and the roar of the storm^[13] and thunders), appears in 4:5; 8:5 (seventh seal); 11:19 (seventh trumpet); 16:18 (seventh bowl), all critical junctures in the development of the book. The last three are all judgment passages, while this is a worship passage. Yet this text prepares for the others, for the awesome God is the basis of both worship and judgment. Moreover, all build on Yahweh passages in the OT, particularly the storm theophanies of Sinai in Exod. 19:16 and the chariot vision of Ezek. 1:13 that is part of Ezek. 1:4–28, the primary background behind much of the throne room vision in Rev. 4. This was an important part of Jewish meditation on the frightening awesomeness of God, as seen in Judg. 5:4; 1 Sam. 7:10; 12:17–18; 2 Sam. 22:8–10; Ps. 18:7–9; 29:3; 77:17–18; 97:4; Jub. 2.2; Heb. 12:18. As Bauckham (1993b: 202–3) says, this “initial vision of his rule in heaven” leads to “the expectation of God’s coming to judge and rule the world.”

The scene now shifts to a position ἐνώπιον τοῦ θρόνου (*enōpion tou thronou*, before the throne). Here are found seven lamps and a sea of glass (4:5–6a). The ἑπτὰ λαμπάδες πυρὸς καϊόμεναι (*hepta lampades pyros kaiomenai*, seven lamps blazing with fire) also stem from Ezek. 1:13, but these are not the flickering “torches” moving “back and forth” in Ezekiel’s vision. These are steady and “blazing” torches^[14] that signify the presence of God. Moreover, these are not the λύχναι (*lychniai*, lampstands) of 1:12, 20 but the same “torches” that in 8:10 are linked with the “great star” that fell from the sky at the third trumpet. The term in the ancient world was often connected with the stars, possibly with falling stars that may have resembled torches (BAGD 465). The key is that both the lightning and the torches are symbols not only of divine majesty but also of judgment in the Apocalypse. As such they prepare the reader for the outpouring of the wrath of the awesome God soon to come in the book. Aune (1997: 295–96) adds that there may be a further connection with emperor worship, since it was Roman practice to carry “sacred fire” before the emperors. Once again, it is Yahweh, not the emperor, who has this authority.

The “seven spirits of God,” as discussed in 1:4, depicts the “sevenfold Spirit of God,” the Holy Spirit.^[15] In Matt. 3:11 Christ would “baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire,” which likely was a symbol of purification and judgment on the nation. In Rev. 4:11 God is both the sustainer and finisher of creation. Here the Spirit joins him in his activity. Building on Zech. 4:1–10, which speaks

of “seven lamps” as the “seven eyes” of God, this indicates that the perfect Spirit is the means by which God will oversee and judge his creation.

Also “before the throne” in verse 6 is something ὥς[16] θάλασσα ὑαλίνη (*hōs thalassa hyalinē*, like a sea of glass). The most likely allusion here is the “expanse” or firmament that separated the waters in Gen. 1:7 (also Ps. 104:3; 148:4; 1 Enoch 14.9; 2 Enoch 3.3; T. Levi 2) and perhaps also the bronze sea in Solomon’s temple (1 Kings 7:23–26; 2 Chron. 4:6). We must add Ezek. 1:22, which builds on Gen. 1:7 in describing “an expanse, sparkling like ice, and awesome,” above the living creatures. The throne of God rested on this “expanse.” “Crystal-clear” glass resembles a sea and adds to the imagery. Note that John does not say this “sea” exists in heaven but that what is there “looks like” a sea of glass. The emphasis is on God’s awesome vastness, his transcendence and his holiness that separate him from his creation (like the firmament separated the waters). The scene is enhanced greatly by this spectacular image. In one sense it is like glass, reflecting the magnificence and kaleidoscopic colors of the throne room. In another sense it is transparent, crystal clear,[17] radiating his awesome holiness (note the “crystal-clear jasper” of 21:11, the “gold like pure glass” of 21:18, and the “crystal-clear river of the water of life” of 22:1 in the description of the New Jerusalem). This “sea” appears twice more in the book: at 15:2 the “sea of glass” is “mingled with fire,” pointing to divine judgment (as has every other image in this section); and in 21:1 we are told “there was no longer any sea,” which may refer to the “sea” as the “abyss,” the chaos of the deep that in ancient times signified the reign of evil in this world (see the excellent discussion in Sweet 1979: 119).[18] All three are interconnected, with 4:6 the basis of the others. Here the crystal-clear sea of glass symbolizes God’s transcendent holiness and his awesome sovereignty that is a source of worship (4:6) and then becomes the basis of judgment (15:2) when God will eradicate evil from his creation (21:1).

v. Four Living Beings (4:6b–8a)

The fourth location with reference to the “throne” is held by “four living beings,”[19] who are ἐν μέσῳ τοῦ θρόνου καὶ κύκλῳ τοῦ θρόνου (*en mesō tou thronou kai kyklō tou thronou*, in the midst of the throne and around the throne). The two prepositions depict these beings in an inner circle virtually within the throne itself. The imagery is strange, since the first means “around” the throne while the second means “in the middle” of it (see 5:6, where the same phrase depicts the Lamb “in the center of the throne”). Some (Mounce, Harrington, Chilton) state simply that they are in the immediate vicinity, integral to the throne, but the prepositions are more precise than this.[20] Since the four living creatures are drawn from Ezek. 1, which seems to indicate that one being was in front of the throne and the others to the side and perhaps behind (from 1:5, 12–13), it is better to follow those (Swete, Beckwith, Beasley-Murray, Thomas) who see these as right next to the throne, surrounding it with their presence.[21]

These heavenly beings are γέμοντα ὀφθαλμῶν ἔμπροσθεν καὶ ὀπίσθεν (*gemonta ophthalmōn emprosthen kai opisthen*, full of[22] eyes in front and behind). This is drawn from Ezek. 1:18, where the rims of the wheels of the chariot-throne were “full of eyes all around.” The wheels are not part of this vision, but the meaning of the “eyes in front and behind” is similar. They signify unceasing vigilance. As in a sense the “eyes” of God, they might even be extensions of his omniscience as they watch over his creation. Nothing can be withheld from these beings as they oversee God’s affairs.

Identifying the images of 4:7 has been the subject of continued speculation. Essential to this is their identification with the lion, the ox, the man, and the eagle. John tells us that they looked “like” (ὅμοιον, *homoion*; see 4:3, 6) or resembled these four created beings. In terms of their

“appearance” (the meaning of ὁμοιον here), they had these four likenesses. The four are drawn from Ezek. 1:5–6, 10–11a, where the order differs (man, lion, ox, eagle) but the meaning is similar (see further below). On the basis of Ezekiel it is possible that the “appearance” relates only to the face, although that is unlikely here, since only the third is said to have a “face.”

Several hypotheses as to their background and meaning have been suggested. (1) The church fathers saw these as representing the four Gospels, but there was little unanimity as to which image represented which Gospel.^[23] This is too fanciful to be seriously considered. (2) Another popular interpretation (R. Charles, Farrer, Kraft, Beasley-Murray) has been to trace their origin through Ezekiel (who lived in Babylon)^[24] to Babylonian mythology, which saw these as the four corners of the zodiac (Taurus = the ox; Leo = the lion; Scorpio = the man; Aquarius = the eagle). While this fits the first three, no valid explanation has been made as to why the eagle came to represent Aquarius, for no eagle was ever used in the zodiac. Moreover, the movement from Babylonian beliefs to Ezekiel to Jewish understanding to John is exceedingly speculative. Finally, John never builds on any such astrological motif in this book, so there is no supporting evidence. Such a theory must remain doubtful. (3) Similar to this, some (Albright, Ford) see the background in Assyrian and Babylonian representations of royalty with winged sphinxes or winged lions. Also, kings are depicted riding on thrones supported by cherubim (as in Ezekiel), so these could be a class of throne-bearing angels who serve Yahweh. This is closer to John’s use here, but again there is no hint of Babylonian imagery^[25] in Revelation. (4) Still others (Walvoord, Johnson) see these as representing divine attributes or spiritual characteristics, such as courage and majesty (lion), patience and strength (ox), intelligence and spirituality (man), and sovereignty and swiftness of action (eagle). This is an interesting speculation but again lacks support in Revelation, for these creatures are never worshiped, nor are they seen in this way. (5) Another view (W. Scott 1900: 126 n.) is that these represent four tribes of Israel (Judah, Reuben, Ephraim, Dan) whose standards stood at the four sides of the tabernacle (Num. 2:2). As the tabernacle/temple is seen to be in heaven in the book, this is also possible. It can never go beyond mere possibility, however, for there is no proof. (6) Still others believe they represent the whole of animate creation (Swete, Ladd, Mounce, Harrington, Wall, Roloff, Giesen, Beale), perhaps detailing what is noblest, strongest, wisest, and swiftest in God’s creation. This seems to be the most viable option, and it avoids the tendency to allegorize the four overmuch. However, there is too little evidence to be certain.

One thing is clear. These four beings combine the cherubim of Ezek. 1 and 10 with the seraphim of Isa. 6.^[26] The four faces are drawn from Ezek. 1:10 and 10:14 and the “eyes all around” from 1:18, while the six wings and liturgical singing stem from Isa. 6:2. We know very little about these two orders of beings. The closest parallels are indeed the winged sphinxes and lions that adorned thrones and stood outside temples in ancient Mesopotamia. In the OT the cherubim and seraphim stood guard over the tree of life (Gen. 3:24), stood at each end of the ark with their wings outstretched over it (Exod. 25:18–20), led worship (Isa. 6:3), and bore God’s chariot through the heavens (Ezek. 1:19–21; cf. 2 Sam. 22:11; Ps. 18:10). In Jewish apocalyptic these beings were also central to the divine rule (1 Enoch 39.12; 61.11–12; 71.7; 2 Enoch 19.16). In Revelation these “four living beings”^[27] lead worship (4:6–9; 5:8–9, 11; 19:4), stand sentinel at the throne (5:6; 7:11; 14:3), and take the lead in the outpouring of divine judgment (6:1, 3, 5–7; 15:7). Since they are nearest the throne (4:6) and take the lead in worship (4:8; 5:14), it is likely that they are the leaders of the heavenly court. In essence, all we can know for certain is that they represent the highest order of celestial beings, perhaps angels,^[28] and lead in worship and judgment. Building on the cherubim and seraphim of Ezekiel and Isaiah, they go beyond those figures in their participation in divine

justice. Once again we see that the throne room of this chapter, centering on worship and glory, prepares for the judgment theme in the rest of the book. Of the options above the most likely is the last. While these four transcend nature in one sense as heavenly beings (cf. 5:13), they also represent the whole of the created order as they stand before God.

The final part of their description in 4:8 consists of two further details, their six wings and their “eyes all around.” As stated above, John draws the “six wings” from Isa. 6:2. In the Isaianic account, two covered their faces, two their feet, and two were used for flying. It is doubtful if the details of Isaiah are intended here (contra Thomas 1992: 360, who allegorizes the Isaianic description and reads it into this passage). The traditional interpretation of swiftness (Swete, Mounce, Johnson, Giesen) makes sense. Though that is emphasized with respect to the cherubim in the OT (2 Sam. 22:11 par. Ps. 18:10; Ezek. 10:16) rather than the seraphim, the two figures are collapsed together in the four living beings; and if the eyes represent vigilance, the wings might represent speed. It is just as possible, however, that no such allegorical significance should be attached, and this is meant to stress the awesome scene of worship from Isa. 6.

The eyes “all around and within” (κυκλόθεν καὶ ἔσωθεν, *kyklothen kai esōthen*) adds to the image of 4:6, “eyes in front and behind,” which is summarized in the “all around” here (4:6 was built on Ezek. 1:18, where the rims of the wheels had “eyes all around”). The picture of eyes “all around and within” has occasioned a great deal of comment. Ancient scribes even added ἔξωθεν (*exōthen*, outside) to make the picture more clear. While some (R. Charles, Mounce, Krodel) have argued that this detail is meant only to stir the imagination and should not be pictured, it is more likely that this builds on Ezek. 10:12 (so Beckwith, Thomas), in which the beings had eyes on “their backs, hands, and wings,” in other words (with the details here), all around their bodies and even under their wings. Still, the significance is the same as 4:6: unceasing vigilance over God’s creation.

vi. Worship of the Celestial Beings (4:8b–11)

There is great emphasis on the “unceasing” worship of the four living beings. In a staccato burst we are told ἀνάπαυσιν οὐκ ἔχουσιν ἡμέρας καὶ νυκτός (*anapausin ouk echousin hēmeras kainyktos*, they have no rest day and night),^[29] thus placing a double emphasis on the continuous activity of these heavenly beings. Such unending praise is quite common in Jewish apocalyptic (1 Enoch 39:12; 40:2; 71:7; 2 Enoch 19:6; 21:1; 2 Bar. 51:11; T. Levi 3.8), as the eternal God is extolled for all time for his majesty and power. This is the primary duty of these celestial creatures, praising God for his lordship over creation and his power. While they have other functions in the book (calling for judgment, watching over God’s creation), all grow out of this primary work. Indeed, one of the major emphases of chapter 4 is this preparation for divine judgment via worship. The destruction of evil is necessary before eternity can begin.

What they “never cease saying” is the first of the many hymns of worship in the book. The hymns are strategically placed throughout to draw attention to two things: the majesty and sovereignty of God, and the worship of his people, heavenly as well as earthly. The emphasis is on the God who delivers and vindicates his people as well as judges the evildoers. Praise is the valid response of those who are the objects of his omnipotent love. Johnson (1981: 463–64) notes how the hymns of these two chapters (4:8, 11; 5:9–10, 12, 13) bring out the unity of the Father and the Son. The first two relate to God, the second two to the Lamb, and the final hymn addresses both. Moreover, the choir gets greater each time, beginning with the four living creatures and concluding with “every creature in heaven and on earth” (5:13).

In this song, the four living beings lead the liturgical worship (as also in 5:8–9, 14) and celebrate

three things: his holiness, his omnipotence, and his eternity (so R. Charles, Mounce, Thomas). They begin with the thrice-repeated “Holy, holy, holy” (called the “trisagion”) undoubtedly drawn from the throne room scene of Isa. 6:3 (there are no others in the OT, but see also 1 Enoch 39.12; 2 Enoch 19.6; 21.1). As there, the repetition here emphasizes his holiness and in a sense refers to “his exceeding great holiness.” Repetition adds emphasis, as in the double “Amen” sayings of the Gospel of John. A thrice-repeated term has even greater stress.^[30] Vassiliades (1997: 99–101) calls the trisagion the most ancient Christian liturgical text and says this is the means by which the church is “lifted up in order to participate in the heavenly liturgy.” The “holiness” of God here points to his separation from this created order. He is the “Wholly Other,” standing above this world and soon to judge it. As Krodel (1989: 158) points out, in Isaiah the seraphim sing, “The whole earth is full of his glory,” but that is not so here, as the earth is full of abominations.

His holiness leads naturally into his omnipotence. Isaiah 6:3 uses the divine title, “Lord Sabaoth” (Lord of Hosts). With ὁ παντοκράτωρ (*ho pantokratōr*, the Almighty) John follows the general LXX translation of that title (although Isa. 6:3 is the one place the LXX retains “Sabaoth”) as “Lord Almighty.” As stated in 1:8, this is one of John’s favorite titles for God (used nine times in the book), referring to his sovereign power and control over his created universe. We must remember that in this period of extreme persecution and testing the church felt quite powerless, so the reminder that God is all-powerful would be especially encouraging. Yet John goes beyond the “Almighty” of 1:8 by using the more complete title “Lord God Almighty” (see also 11:17; 15:3; 16:7; 19:6; 21:22) to emphasize not only his power but also his lordship over creation.^[31] The Almighty One is indeed the “Lord God.” The church need not fret over the seeming power of the ungodly forces.

Finally, the living beings celebrate the eternity of the one ὁ ἦν καὶ ὁ ὢν καὶ ὁ ἐρχόμενος (*ho ēn kai ho ōn kai ho erchomenos*, who was and is and is to come), following the title used in 1:8 rather than that in 1:4, which reversed the past (“who was”) and the present (“who is”). The emphasis is on the God who sovereignly controls past, present, and future. Each aspect should not be overly stressed (contra Thomas 1992: 363, who says the past is emphasized and the future relates to the longing of creation for redemption), but the effect of the whole predominates. God is eternal and sovereign. Mounce (1998: 126) may be correct in calling this an expansion of the interpretation of “Yahweh” in Exod. 3:14, “I AM WHO I AM.” The eternity of God is repeated twice more in 4:9, 10, “him who lives forever and ever.”

The scene then shifts from the four living beings (4:8b–9) to the twenty-four elders (4:10–11). Verse 9 is a temporal clause (ὅταν, *hotan*, whenever) modifying the main clause in verse 10. These hymns are sung antiphonally (as also in 11:15–18; 16:5–7; 19:1–8), with the living beings celebrating the holiness of God and then the elders providing the refrain on his worthiness to be worshiped. There is some debate as to whether this is continual worship, since ὅταν with a future indicative^[32] simply means “when.” Because the elders “lay down their crowns,” Krodel (1989: 158) believes that this must refer to worship at the eschaton. Thus this will occur after the events of this book have taken place. However, 4:8 states that this worship is “unceasing,” so it more likely refers to ongoing worship.

Interestingly, the hymn of the four living beings is described as giving δόξαν καὶ τιμὴν καὶ εὐχαριστίαν (*doxan kai timēn kai eucharistian*, glory and honor and thanks), and both “glory and honor” are used in the hymn of the elders in verse 11. Most agree that this is also a doxological hymn but stated indirectly rather than directly. The first two terms refer to the glory due God for who he is, namely for his omnipotence and eternity mentioned in verse 8. “Glory” is ascribed primarily to God (1:6; 4:9, 11; 7:12; 11:13; 14:7; 15:8; 16:9; 19:1, 7; 21:11, 23) but also to Christ (5:12), to

both together (5:13), to an angel as participating in the divine glory (18:1), and to the nations as yielding their “glory” to God (21:24, 26). It was the primary term chosen in the LXX to translate the Hebrew כָּבוֹד (*kābôd*), which signified the majesty and glory of the sovereign God. As Hegermann (*EDNT* 1:345) says, “It is used esp. in reference to the deity as an expression of the manifestation of his sovereign rule over nature and history, on the one hand in the powerful form of divine radiance in theophanies, but even more in the majesty of his historical acts of salvation and judgment, perceptible only to the eye of faith.” It is often combined with τιμή in the OT (Ps. 8:5; Job 40:10; in Ps. 29:1 and 96:7 of the LXX, the pair interprets the MT “glory and strength”), and in the NT “glory and honor” signify the prestige or esteem that God deserves (e.g., Rom. 2:7; 1 Tim. 1:17; Heb. 2:7). In this book the two are combined in 4:9, 11; 5:12, 13; 7:12; 21:26 (indeed, every place “honor” is used). Τιμή adds the concept of esteem, respect, and recognition to that of “glory.” Εὐχαριστία refers to the “thanksgiving” due him for what he does, for his action on behalf of his people. It occurs only here and in 7:12 (the verb cognate occurs in 11:17) and in the NT always refers to thanks to God for his bountiful gifts. This fits the two songs and provides a natural bridge, since the praise of the living creatures centers on God’s attributes, and the praise of the elders centers on his work in creation.

The direction of their worship sums up two major aspects of God in chapter 4. First, he “sits on his throne,” a phrase drawn from 4:2 and intended to represent the description of the sovereign God from 4:2–3. He is the great God, the King of kings, the one next to whom Caesar pales into insignificance.^[33] Second, he is the eternal God. Τῷ ζῶντι εἰς τοὺς αἰῶνας τῶν αἰώνων (*tō zōnti eis tous aiōnas tōn aiōnōn*, to the one who lives forever and ever) occurs not only twice here (4:9, 10) but also in 10:6 and 15:7. It is drawn from Dan. 4:34 and 12:7 of the LXX, which also praises the sovereign God who eternally reigns. In the book as a whole, “forever and ever” encompasses not only the everlasting majesty of God (1:6; 5:13; 7:12) but also the eternal glory and reign of Christ (1:18; 5:13; 11:15) as well as eternal judgment for the unbeliever (14:11; 19:3; 20:10) and eternal reward for the faithful (22:5). It is clear that the focus of this book draws on the eternal future in order to address the present. As we center on the God who controls the future, we can overcome the difficulties of the present.

Each time the living beings lift up their voices in worship^[34] (4:10), the twenty-four elders prostrate themselves before (πεσοῦνται . . . ἐνώπιον, *pesountai . . . enōpion*, will fall down before) God and “worship” him. The obeisance of the elders occurs often in the book (5:8, 14; 7:11; 11:16; 19:4) and is built on the liturgical worship of the people of God as well as supplicants to the Roman emperor. Debates that play off one against the other are wrongheaded because the atmosphere of this chapter combines both images. Indeed, they are one and the same image, depending on whether one “falls before” the secular king or the King of kings. In the secular realm it was common for petitioners to prostrate themselves before the king and kiss his garment. Lesser kings would lay their crowns before the emperor to show their submission to him (Tacitus, *Annals* 15.29, tells how the Parthian king Tiridates laid his crown at Nero’s feet). This constitutes the third act of the elders (in addition to prostration and worship), who have “crowns [the στεφάνοι (*stephanoî*) of authority but not the διαδήματα (*diadēmata*) of sovereignty; cf. 12:3; 19:12] of gold on their heads” (4:4) and yield them to God. Stevenson (1995: 268–70) calls this an act of vassalage or subordination and demonstrates that homage belongs only to God. God alone is worthy of such obeisance. The Roman emperor himself will be forced to submit to God, for he alone reigns “forever and ever.” All earthly rulers (and heavenly in the case of the elders) must yield to the sovereign God.

The song of the elders in praise to God (4:11) provides a proper climax to the whole scene of

chapter 4. While the worship of the living beings is in the third person, singing about God, the worship of the elders is directly sung to God in the second person. Again, it is often noted (Mounce 1998: 127; Aune 1997: 309; Giesen 1997: 155–56) that this language is not just liturgical but political, reflecting the terminology of Roman court ceremony (“worthy are you,” “our Lord and God,” “glory, honor, and power”). God again is presented as the only one worthy of worship and allegiance. To worship any other is sacrilegious.

There are two parts to the hymn, centering on the worthiness of God and then on his creative and sustaining work.[35] The opening ἄξιός εἰ (axios ei, worthy are you) does not occur in the OT but appears to have been drawn from Roman practice, the acclamation accorded the emperor or imperial representative as he entered a city. God alone is truly “worthy” of worship.[36] This theme of superiority to all earthly rulers, especially Caesar, is continued in ὁ κύριος καὶ ὁ θεὸς ἡμῶν (ho kyrios kai ho theos hēmōn, our Lord and God). As in “worthy are you,” this exact title does not occur in the OT but is the same acclamation claimed by Domitian for himself, *Dominus et Deus noster*, contrary to the normal first-century practice of recognizing the emperor as a god after his death (so Beasley-Murray, Roloff, Aune).[37] It is not the emperor who deserves this title but Yahweh. The ascription of lordship to God (1:8; 4:8, 11; 11:4, 15, 17; 15:3, 4; 16:7; 18:8; 19:6; 21:22; 22:5, 6) and Christ (11:8; 14:13; 17:14; 19:16; 22:20, 21) is a major theme in the book, centering on their cosmic lordship over creation. Again, sovereignty is the primary emphasis.

Because God is “worthy” and is “Lord” of all, he must receive[38] “glory, honor, and power.” There are two developments here, one from the previous song in 4:8 and another from the description of the worship of the living beings in 4:9. The song in verse 8 celebrated the power of “Lord God Almighty,” and in verse 9 we were told that the four living beings ascribed to him “glory, honor, and thanks.” The hymn of 4:11 combines the worship of both verses 8 and 9. The first two (“glory and honor”) were discussed in verse 9, and that should be consulted. The third member of the triad in verse 9 (“thanks”) is changed here to τὴν δύναμιν (tēn dynamin, power).[39] It is the favored term in the Synoptics for the “powerful” miracles of Christ, and in Revelation refers especially to the mighty deeds of God. It is normally attributed to God (4:11; 7:12; 11:17; 12:10; 15:8; 19:1), is extended to the Lamb in 5:12, and is attributed to both together in 5:13. In the OT and sometimes in the NT (Mark 14:62 par. Matt. 26:64) it becomes a title for God, “Mighty One.” The rabbis even used it as a circumlocution for God (see Betz, *NIDNTT* 2:602). In the OT the “power” of God was especially observed in the exodus of Israel from Egypt, where terms for power especially predominate (e.g., Deut. 3:24 LXX, “your strength and your might and your mighty hand”). This idea of a personal God who controls history via acts of power occurs often in the OT and becomes a staple of Jewish apocalyptic. For instance, 1QM 11.1–12.5 celebrates the mighty deeds by which God will bring an end to this age and introduce the age of the “children of light.” The Messiah as divine warrior will bring this age to a close (Ps. Sol. 17.24–51; see Grundmann, *TDNT* 2:290–99; Betz, *NIDNTT* 2:602–3). The triad of titles here not only adds the acclamation of 4:8 to the worship of 4:9 but also celebrates God’s “power” over his creation, which is the theme of the rest of the hymn.

Three main verbs in the last half of this hymn form an ABA pattern: “created,” “exist,” and “were created.” God is the emphatic subject (σύ, sy, you yourself), and all creation is the object (τὰ πάντα, ta panta, all things). The first element centers on the creation theology that virtually dominates the Bible (Ps. 19:1–2; 33:9; Isa. 40:28; 45:18; Eph. 3:9; Col. 1:16) and is a key theme throughout the Apocalypse (Rev. 3:14; 4:11; 10:6; 14:7; 21:1). There is certainly a further contrast with Caesar, for only God creates life, but the major message is the worship of the Creator who has made “all things” possible. Christ has already been called “the ruler of God’s creation” (3:14), and

here we see that celebrated. Moreover, in 12:16 (the earth swallowing the serpent's flood) and 16:8 (the sun scorching the earth-dwellers) creation fights on the side of God against the dragon and his followers. This is part of the apocalyptic theme attested in Rom. 8:19–22, the “groaning” of creation as it longs to be released from the “decay” of this present evil world. In Revelation the created world participates in the process of its release.

The next two aspects further explicate this theme. In ἦσαν (*ēsan*, were) the very existence of creation is διὰ τὸ θέλημά σου (*dia to thelēma sou*, because of your will).^[40] Behind creation is divine providence; his “will” is the basis for every aspect of creation. In Heb. 11:3 (also Rom. 4:17) we are told that God by his command created the universe out of nothing. Here we know that the world is also sustained by his will. All this is preparatory for the fact that this world will be consummated and destroyed in his own sovereign time (2 Pet. 3:7, 10). God is the “Alpha and Omega” of creation!

Many have noted the strange order in the two final verbs; one would expect them to be reversed, with the act of creation preceding the existence of creation. Some (R. Charles, Swete, Mounce) interpret ἦσαν as teaching the preexistence of creation in the mind of God, the potential of existence before it was created. This is ingenious but unnecessary. It is far simpler to note the ABA pattern and see ἐκτίσθησαν (*ektisthēsan*, were created) as restating the “created all things” of the first element. We do not have chronology here but rather a logical order (so Ladd 1972: 78; Thomas 1992: 368). God is creator and sustainer of the whole of creation. As Beale (1999: 335) says, the purpose “is to emphasize preservation because the pastoral intention throughout the book is to encourage God’s people to recognize that everything that happens to them throughout history is part of God’s creation purposes.”

Summary and Contextualization

This chapter is certainly one of the most magnificent portions in the Bible, building as it does on the exalted throne room scenes of Isa. 6 and Ezek. 1. At the outset we must note that there is no literal description of God, as indeed there is none anywhere in the Bible. As John says in John 1:18, “No one has seen God at any time.” Nevertheless, the symbolic depiction of God here is majestic and grounds for worship on our part. This chapter has three primary purposes: (1) to ground our own liturgical worship in the heavenly worship of the celestial beings; (2) to contrast the magnificence of God with the earthly “glory” of Caesar and all earthly rulers; and (3) to show that the judgment of God (chaps. 6–20) is grounded in his holiness and redemptive work (chaps. 4–5). God is creator of all and as such is sovereign over all. Whenever people choose to worship the creature (as in the imperial cult) rather than the Creator, it is blasphemy and must lead to judgment.

Each of these themes is relevant for the church today and needs to be understood more clearly by Christians. The Westminster Confession says that humankind was created to “glorify God and enjoy him forever,” and worship in our day needs to return to the NT pattern that views it as a daily lifestyle and not just relegated to the church service. Moreover, while we do not have an “imperial cult” today, we have something far more subtle and every bit as insidious, the “cult of personality.” Even Christians at times have a “god on the shelf,” often a religious leader. Any person or thing that comes to be more important than God in our lives constitutes idolatrous worship. God must be all and in all in our lives. In short, the truths of this chapter demand to be lived out in every aspect of our lives.

There have been scores of articles and books on the crisis of worship in the church today. The

average service so centers on the horizontal life of the Christian that the experience of awe in the worship of God, the feeling that we are in his presence, is all too often lost. The church as the throne of God, the minister as mediating his presence in the same way as the living creatures and elders in this chapter, is one antidote to this paucity of worship. Christians must experience God in his glorious splendor, and few passages are better than this for that purpose.

Additional Notes

4:1. θύρα ἡνεωγμένη ἐν τῷ οὐρανῷ: Dispensationalists often understand this phrase as referring to the “rapture” of the church. When John is caught up to the open heaven, it signifies the church being taken up to be with Christ (cf. 1 Thess. 4:13–18), supported by the absence of any mention of ἐκκλησία between 4:1 and 22:16. However, the three major dispensational commentators (Walvoord, Johnson, Thomas) agree that there is little reason to posit this as the rapture of the church. The term ἐκκλησία always refers to the seven churches of 2:1–3:22, and the believers are called “saints.” This is a call to John to participate in the vision and see the revelation of the majesty of God on his throne, not a call to the church to ascend to heaven. On the basis of other passages (e.g., 1 Thess. 4:13–18; 5:9; Rev. 3:10), dispensationalists see the rapture as occurring before the event in 4:1.

4:1. ἀνάβα ὧδε: Himmelfarb (1991) does a major study of the theme of people ascending to heaven in Jewish apocalyptic. By examining such works as the Book of Watchers in 1 Enoch 17–36 (the first account of an ascent to heaven), 2 Enoch 22, and 3 Enoch 4, she notes a transformation of Enoch from one taken into the presence of God to one who becomes an angel and then an exalted angel, a star, and a member of the heavenly host. The Ascension of Isaiah and the Apocalypse of Abraham emphasize the glory of worshiping God along with the heavenly host. She believes that this theme parallels the developing angelology of the intertestamental period. With the destruction of the temple and the exile, God seemed to recede further away from direct relationship with his people. Therefore, two themes emerged: the exaltation of angels as mediators between God and humanity and the heavenly journeys to be with the heavenly host. This is a valuable hypothesis and certainly viable. I must say, however, that the Book of Revelation is far more muted than this, primarily because of its view that God is already intimately involved with his people. The purpose of John’s ascension is not to be one of the heavenly host but to see and understand that God and the angels are superior to Caesar and his court and that God is indeed in sovereign control of this world.

4:1. μετὰ ταῦτα: Westcott and Hort in their critical edition punctuated verse 1b with a period after ἃ δεῖ γενέσθαι, so that μετὰ ταῦτα began verse 2 rather than ending verse 1. As several point out (see Thomas 1992: 337 n. 23), however, verse 19 shows that “after these things” properly belongs with “what must take place.”

4:2. ἐν πνεύματι: Bauckham (1993b: 154–59) extensively traces the background to John’s visionary translation into heaven, arguing that the basis was Elijah’s translation in the fiery “chariot of the wind” (2 Kings 2:11; cf. Sir. 48:9) to heaven. With Elijah as the model, visionary transportation can be found in 1 Kings 18:12; 2 Kings 2:16; Ezek. 3:12, 14; 8:3; 11:1, 24; 37:1; 43:5; Bel 36; 2 Bar. 6:3; Acts 8:39–40; Rev. 17:3; 21:10; Herm. Vis. 1.1.3; 2.1.1. The Ezekiel imagery in terms of the “Spirit” basis is paramount, but in all (including Revelation) the power of God and the Spirit of Jesus are emphasized. Like the outpouring of the Spirit in the last days (Acts 2:16–21 = Joel 2:28–32), the purpose was to point toward the parousia of Christ.

4:3. ἶρις: Ford (1975b: 71) explores the background behind the “rainbow.” In Gen. 9:13 the “rainbow” may be Yahweh’s “war bow” (with imagery of lightning flashing in the sky) hung in the clouds as a sign that his anger has passed. The rabbis elevated the rainbow to quasi-divine status, saying one should not gaze on a rainbow (*b. Hag.* 16a); others said that upon seeing a rainbow, one should recite, “Praised be the Lord our God, the king of the universe, who remembers the covenant and is faithful in the covenant” (*b. Ber.* 59a). Many took it as a sign of judgment, reminding them of the wickedness of the earth (*b. Ketub.* 77b). The theological significance of the rainbow symbol was many-faceted for Judaism.

4:4. εἴκοσι τέσσαρας πρεσβυτέρους: Some, following Gunkel in the twentieth century, have tried to see the elders as the counterpart of the twenty-four Babylonian star gods who controlled the zodiac, but this is highly unlikely. Gunkel believed they were borrowed by Jewish apocalyptic and turned into angels, but there is little proof for such and even less proof that John or his readers could have known of such background (see the excellent discussion in Beasley-Murray 1978: 114 n. 1). As so often with history-of-religion approaches, parallels are turned into origins.

4:7. τὸ πρόσωπον ὡς ἀνθρώπου: In a few later manuscripts (P 1 1611 1854 2053 syr^h TR etc.) the nominative ἄνθρωπος replaces the genitive ἀνθρώπου, which has stronger support (A 046 Irenaeus vg most minuscules etc.) and is the less likely reading. Other changes have also been made by scribes, such as omitting τὸ, removing the ὡς, or adding ὅμοιον before the ὡς. All these changes were occasioned by the grammatical clumsiness of the genitive ἀνθρώπου, which does not seem to modify anything in the context. However, such a construction is unusual but not impossible. This is another solecism discussed in BDF §136, a hanging genitive. It should be translated, “like a man.”

4:11. ἦσαν καὶ ἐκτίσθησαν: The problem of placing the existence of creation before the act of creation has occasioned some changes in ancient manuscripts, for instance changing ἦσαν to εἰσίν (as in P 1854 2050 TR) or adding οὐκ before ἦσαν (046 etc.). These were all attempts to solve a so-called problem in chronology, however, and the explanation in the text is far better.

b. Christ the Lamb, Worthy to Open the Seals (5:1–14)

The exalted majesty of God in chapter 4 leads to the exaltation of the Lamb, also at “the center of the throne” (5:6) and also celebrated in worship (5:8–14). The unity of God and the Lamb is obviously a major emphasis of these two chapters. As Bauckham (1993a: 58–63; 1993b: 133–40) brings out, worship throughout the Bible is completely monotheistic, intended to separate God from his creatures (the worship of whom constitutes idolatry). Even angels refuse worship (19:10; 22:8–9). In these two chapters the worship of God (4:8–11) leads to the worship of the Lamb (5:8–12), and this in turn leads to the worship of God and the Lamb by the whole of creation (5:13). It is clear that God and the Lamb are one (John 10:30, “I and the Father are one”).

The atmosphere in this chapter is probably that of the eschaton (depending on one’s view of the scroll). In the opening scene the reader has the feeling that imminent events will usher in the final events of history and the consummation of God’s plan. There is a breathless sense of anticipation that is dashed when no one is available to open the seals of the scroll. The rest of the chapter is then devoted to the one who is worthy to open the seals. Some of the most magnificent Christology in the NT can be found in this chapter. Jesus is portrayed as the lion who is the conquering Lamb who is the slain Lamb who is at the center of the throne and is God himself. The rapid development of these images is incredible. The reader is overwhelmed by the sheer power of the picture of Christ as it unfolds. Roloff (1993: 75) notes a threefold traditional pattern of the type found in the christological hymns of the NT (e.g., Phil. 2:9–11; 1 Tim. 3:16; Heb. 1:5): exaltation (v. 5), transfer of authority (vv. 6–7), and presentation before subjects paying homage (vv. 8–14).

On the whole, chapter 5 portrays the transfer of authority from God to the Lamb. Holwerda (1999: 152, building on Stefanovic 1996: 182–88) calls this an enthronement ceremony paralleling that of King Joash in 2 Kings 11:12–17; 2 Chron. 23:11–20. In this sense the scroll becomes an official document affirming the Lamb’s right to rule. While this overstates the situation here (there is no crown or official ceremony), it is an interesting comparison. From the center of the throne, God and the Lamb will together direct the judgment poured down upon the earth-dwellers. First, God transfers the scroll from his “right hand” (see 1:16) to the Lamb, who also is “worthy” (5:2, 9, 12). The early verses of the chapter focus on the fact that no human or even celestial agency will suffice. Only the Lamb has the power to open the seals. The worship of the Lamb parallels the worship of God and again is the necessary prelude to judgment. The Lamb has purchased the people of God by his blood sacrifice (v. 9) and thereby rendered himself “worthy” to lead also in judgment (6:1–2). The cross is the basis of both divine love (redemption) and justice (judgment).

- i. Double-sided scroll (5:1)
- ii. One worthy to open the book (5:2–5)
- iii. The Lamb takes the scroll (5:6–10)
 - (1) Lamb described (5:6)
 - (2) Scroll taken (5:7)
 - (3) Worship of the Lamb (5:8–10)
- iv. Worship by angelic choir (5:11–12)

Exegesis and Exposition

¹And I saw on the right hand of the one seated on the throne a scroll, with writing both inside and outside and sealed with seven seals. ²And I saw a mighty angel proclaiming in a loud voice, “Who is worthy to open the scroll and to break its seals?” ³No one, either in heaven or on the earth or under the earth, was able to open the scroll or examine it. ⁴And I was weeping loudly, for no one was found worthy to open the scroll or examine it. ⁵One of the elders said to me, “Stop weeping. Behold, the lion of the tribe of Judah, the root of David, has conquered. Therefore, he will open the scroll and its seven seals.” ⁶Then I saw in the midst of the throne and the four living creatures and in the midst of the elders a Lamb standing as if slain, having seven horns and seven eyes that are the “seven” spirits of God sent to all the earth. ⁷And he came and took it from the right hand of the one who sat on the throne. ⁸When he took the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb, with each one having a harp and golden bowls filled with incense, which are the prayers of the saints. ⁹Then they sang a new song,

“You are worthy to take the scroll

and to open its seals,

because you were slain and purchased people for God with your blood

from every tribe and language and people and nation;

¹⁰and you made them a kingdom and priests belonging to our God,

and they are going to reign on the earth.”

¹¹And I saw and heard a voice of many angels around the throne and the living creatures and the elders. And their number was ten thousand times ten thousand and a thousand times a thousand, ¹²singing with a loud voice,

“Worthy is the Lamb who was slain to receive

power and wealth and wisdom and strength

and honor and glory and blessing.”

¹³And I heard every created being that is in heaven and on the earth and under the earth and in the sea, indeed all that is in them, saying,

“To the one seated on the throne and to the Lamb:

blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever.”

¹⁴And the four living creatures said, “Amen.” And the elders fell down and worshiped.

i. Double-Sided Scroll (5:1)

Καὶ εἶδον (*kai eidon*, and I saw) occurs four times (5:1, 2, 6, 11) and divides the chapter into separate scenes (5:1, 2–5, 6–10, 11–14). In the first, God is on his throne and holds a double-sided scroll in the palm of his right hand. The first half of the verse summarizes chapter 4. The one “seated on the throne” (4:2, 3, 9, 10) is the King of kings, the exalted Lord of the universe, the one who alone is worthy of worship. His “right hand” is not mentioned in chapter 4 but is drawn from 1:16, 17, 20; 2:1. As elsewhere, the “right hand” symbolizes power and authority. Here the scroll is “on” (ἐπί, *epi*) rather than “in” (ἐν, *en*) the hand of God, thus picturing it lying on God’s open palm.^[1] Behind this is Ezek. 2:9, 10 (also Dan. 12:4; Isa. 29:11, 12; Jer. 36:1–25), where a scroll with words of “lament, mourning, and woe” written “on both sides of it” is found in the hands of God and shown to Ezekiel. The message of judgment given to Ezekiel provides the background to the scroll and the seven seals here.

The βιβλίον (*biblion*, scroll) was made of strips of papyrus laid end to end and glued together to form a lengthy strip that could be rolled into a scroll.^[2] This was the most popular type of writing material for three millennia, from Egypt in 3000 B.C. to Roman times. Papyrus was formed when strips of pith from the papyrus plant were laid in two layers at right angles to each other, then beaten, pressed, and smoothed to form a type of paper. Another kind of scroll was made from leather or tanned hides. “Parchment,” a leather made from sheep- or goatskins smoothed with lime, was discussed in the introduction to the letter to Pergamum (2:12–17). Scrolls were often ten meters long and normally were written on only one side, usually the side where the fibers ran

horizontally (with the writing) rather than vertically (see Lemaire, *ABD* 6:1003–4). Scrolls with writing on both sides have been called “opisthographs” (a transliteration of ὀπισθεν [*opisthen*, on the other side] here). Such documents, especially those sealed, were usually private contracts kept from the public. Copies of them were not sealed. “Seals” were wax or clay blobs placed where the scroll ended and often sealed further with a signet ring to make the document official. The purpose of the seals here is to keep the contents secret until the time of fulfillment, a common apocalyptic theme (Dan. 8:26; 12:9).

There are several possibilities for the identification of this doubly inscribed, sealed document (Ladd 1972: 79–81):

1. The Lamb’s book of life: This is a major theme in Revelation (3:5; 13:8; 17:8; 20:12, 15; 21:27) and would mean that the names of the redeemed are to be divulged (e.g., Niles 1962: 55). The writing on the front and back would be due to the vast numbers named. The problem here is the absence of any pointers to such in this context. The judgments and rewards stressed in chapters 4–6 make this unlikely; the emphasis is on events (“what is to happen soon,” 4:1), not names. The scrolls here and in 10:1–11 introduce the plan God has for the future of his creation.

2. The OT, especially the Torah, with its blessings and cursings stipulating the covenant laws (Mowry, Prigent, Sweet): These blessings and curses are fulfilled in the NT, as the OT revelation of God’s will is “opened” by the Lamb and becomes the basis for the outpouring of judgment on the enemies of God and the vindication of the saints. This view certainly fits the predominance of OT fulfillment in this book, but it does not quite fit the tone of the book at this point. The emphasis here is on the future, not just the past; and the death of Christ (5:6, 9, 12), more than OT prophecy, is central.

3. The last will and testament containing the inheritance of the saints and sealed with seven seals (Zahn, Moffatt, Ford, Roloff, Beasley-Murray): The testator would place the will on the scroll or sheet, then have it sealed by seven witnesses. Upon his death, the seals would be broken (preferably with the witnesses present) and the contents made known. This is very possible, but there is not a great deal of emphasis on the inheritance of the saints in this context, and such imagery is never used of the judgments on the unbelievers (chap. 6).

4. A divorce bill, folded and signed on the “other side” by witnesses, borrowing OT imagery on the unfaithfulness of Israel (particularly from Exodus). Thus Christ is divorcing apostate Jerusalem and marrying the New Jerusalem (Ford 1971: 136–43). This is interesting but does not quite fit the details. Moreover, the idea of divorce is not really used elsewhere in the book.

5. The doubly inscribed contract deed, sealed with seven seals and with a description of the contents written on the back (Roller, Lohse, Beasley-Murray, Beale): This type of deed has an ancient history; it was used by the Egyptians, Babylonians, Greeks, and Romans. The contract would be written on the inner side, rolled up and sealed with seven seals, and a short description would be written on the outer side. Ford (1975b: 92–94) describes the Jewish form of this deed, the folded or tied deed, sealed by at least three witnesses, with the number attesting the importance of the document. It could be used in divorce cases (cf. Deut. 24:1, 3; Isa. 50:1; Jer. 3:8; Mark 10:4; Matt. 5:31; 19:7). While this does not fit the contents of chapters 6–20 exactly, with the judgment-vindication theme, it does provide the closest parallel thus far.

6. A heavenly book containing God’s redemptive plan and the future history of God’s creation (Caird, Ladd, Talbert, Mounce, Thomas), perhaps detailing the prophecies in this book. Such were common in Jewish apocalyptic (1 Enoch 47.3; 81.1–3; 106.19; 107.1). These then detail the judgments that will inaugurate the eschaton and provide an end to history and a beginning to the eternal

reign of Christ as well as the joy of the people of God.

A combination of the fifth (the background of the image) and sixth (the meaning of the image) views best fits the data (though see below for the way it also transforms this image). It is unlikely that John chose details such as the writing on front and back and the sealing by seven seals simply for symbolic effect. The elements so closely resemble the Jewish and Roman contract deed that the background must be found there. Nevertheless, the place of it in the book goes beyond the contract deed to the heavenly tablet containing the purpose and end of redemptive history. As such, it summarizes the whole of biblical truth, beginning with the foreshadowing of the plan in the OT and the progressive unveiling of it in Christ. It was the death of Christ that anchored God's redemptive plan, and the rest of Revelation describes the events that will bring that plan to completion. The judgment of the nations (as in "the words of lament and mourning and woe" written on the scroll in Ezek. 2:10) in the seals, trumpet, and bowls is part of that plan, especially when we see how the judgments present a final opportunity to the nations for repentance (9:20, 21; 15:4; 16:9, 11). Moreover, the redemptive plan was necessitated by the effects of sin, and judgment is necessary to purify God's creation and to purge it from "its bondage to decay" (Rom. 8:19–22). It is important here to note that the events of chapter 6 accompany the opening of the seals and do not constitute the contents of the scroll. The judgments of the seals are preliminary events that lead up to the unfolding drama of the eschaton and the completion of the divine plan. As Bauckham (1993b: 250–51) argues, the scrolls of chapters 5 and 10 are actually one and the same scroll, and the contents of the scroll are behind the events of Revelation and not just identical with it. In other words, Revelation tells how God brings about the culmination of his plan, namely the contents of the scroll. Thus chapter 6 describes anticipatory visions, and the contents of the scroll are not revealed until later. That constitutes the plan of God behind the visions as a whole, namely those events that will end this world of evil and introduce eternity.

This scroll is γεγραμμένον ἔσωθεν καὶ ὀπίσθεν (*gegrammenon esōthen kai opisthen*, written on the front and the back), which does not simply describe a contract deed. The latter had a description of the contents written on the back, but this is a true "opisthograph," with as much on the back as on the front. Thus while it is built on the image of a contract deed, it also transforms that image. Most likely, this points to the amount of the revelations. They are comprehensive, and there is too much to place on a single scroll (see Aune 1997: 341).

The "seven seals" point to completeness, focusing on the fullness of the divine plan. It is perfect and is to be unveiled at the perfect time. This combines the secrecy of Isa. 29:11 and Dan. 8:26 with the unveiling of the scroll in Ezek. 2:9–10. It is debated whether the seals are pictured on the edge of the scroll (so most exegetes) or inside the scroll (so Alford, Morris, Ford, Thomas), in the manner of a "folded contract deed" described above. In this sense the contents of the scroll would be revealed one at a time as each seal was successively broken. However, this depends on whether chapter 6 forms the contents of the scroll. That is unlikely, for as shown in the previous paragraphs, the scroll details God's plan for ending this present world order, namely the events behind the seals, trumpets, and bowls. Therefore, the seals are on the outside of the scroll, and chapter 6 provides preliminary events that lead up to the eschaton, when the divine plan is completed.

ii. One Worthy to Open the Book (5:2–5)

In Ezek. 2:10 God himself opens the scroll; here he looks for an agent, for it is his Son, the Lamb, who is to usher in the final events. Since the voice of God is heard only at the beginning (1:8) and

end (21:5–8) of the book, the question is asked by an angelic mediator. What John sees is ἄγγελον ἰσχυρόν (*angelon ischyron*, a mighty angel). It is difficult to know why a “mighty angel” is needed here. He appears three times: here, at the presentation of the “little scroll” (10:1–2), and at the announcement of the destruction of “Babylon” (18:21). Most likely this figure is an archangel, though attempts to identify him, for instance with Michael or Gabriel, are wrongheaded. The three appearances are at critical times in the narrative to introduce key events. The two scrolls of chapters 5 and 10 are closely linked, as already stated, and the destruction of Babylon the Great is an essential component to the contents of the scroll.

He calls ἐν ᾧ φωνῇ μεγάλῃ (*en phōnē megalē*, with a loud voice), as also in 10:3. Moreover, he “proclaims” (κηρύσσοντα, *kēryssonta*) rather than “states,” again to emphasize a particularly important pronouncement. The angel functions as a royal herald with a proclamation from the King. The content of the announcement takes the form of a question, Τίς ἄξιος (*Tis axios*, Who is worthy?). Since God himself is not going to open the scrolls (unlike in Ezekiel), a search is made of all creation to find a “worthy” being. Five of the six uses of ἄξιος in this book occur in these two chapters. God himself is “worthy” in 4:11. In 5:2–4 he seeks a “worthy” stand-in to “open the scroll and break the seals.” [3] There is only one such “worthy” being, the slain Lamb, who is celebrated first in terms of the reason for his “worthiness” (5:9, 10) and then the results, as he like God is given a sevenfold acclamation (5:12 = 4:11). This is not so much a moral or spiritual “worthiness” (though it includes that) but rather an inherent “sufficiency” (the term is a close equivalent to ἱκανός, *hikanos*, “sufficient”) that enables a being to perform an act like opening the scroll. It is authority more than virtue that is the subject.

The universal nature of the question is confirmed in verse 3, as no one worthy is found ἐν τῷ οὐρανῷ οὐδὲ ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς οὐδὲ ὑποκάτω τῆς γῆς (*en tō ouranō oude epitēs gēs oude hypokatō tēs gēs*, in heaven or on the earth or under the earth). This threefold division (following the Jewish belief in a three-tiered universe) is common in Scripture (Exod. 20:4, 11; Job 11:8–9; Ps. 146:6; Phil. 2:10) and probably refers to the whole of the created order rather than to three specific kinds of beings or spatially to three spheres of life. This does not mean that a lengthy search through every region of the created order takes place (contra Morris 1987: 93) but rather that it is obvious that no being has the authority to fulfill this function. Those “under the earth” could refer to those in the grave, possibly the OT saints. In Jewish cosmology, however, it almost certainly refers to the underworld regions, the “abyss” of 9:2, 11; and 11:7, where the demonic forces dwell (see Aune 1997: 348). The point is that all created beings (as in 5:13) lack the power (ἐδύνατο, *edynato*, able or have the power) [4] to “open the scroll” or even βλέπειν αὐτό (*blepein auto*, to look at it). [5] The latter refers not to observing the scroll but to examining its contents after it has been opened. When we think of the power of God’s mighty angels, the deeds of the heroes of the OT, and the spiritual accomplishments of the kings, prophets, and apostles of Scripture, this is an incredible statement. However, the purpose is to demonstrate the only achievement that could be worthy, the sacrificial death of Christ as the true conquest of evil. All else has been merely preparatory to the final defeat of Satan at the cross.

John “weeps” in 5:4 because no one can be found “worthy to open the scroll.” With the third appearance of “open the scroll” in this short passage, it is obvious that the entire attention of the reader is fixed on the contents of the scroll. From 4:1, where John is told he would be “shown what must take place,” we have been awaiting the revelation. Now it seems that this expectancy might be thwarted, so John ἔκλαιον πολὺ (*eklaion poly*, was weeping greatly). [6] The language entails a deep-seated grief, even a mourning for what is lost. [7] Is the divine plan to go unrealized? While

some have tried to say John wept over the “moral incapacity” of created beings (Swete 1911: 77; Talbert 1994: 28–29) or because he could not find out the contents of the scroll (Beckwith 1919: 508; Moffatt 1983: 383), it is more likely that he wept over the events that might go unrealized, namely the coming of the final kingdom of God (Caird, Beale, Aune).

The solution is presented in 5:5. One of [8] the twenty-four “elders” of 4:4, 10 comes to John and assuages his fears. Here and in 7:13 it is an elder who addresses John, while in most other places it is an angel. Since both are heavenly beings, there is no particular importance to this being an elder rather than an angel. He first of all tells John, *Μὴ κλαῖε* (*Mē klaie*, stop weeping). There is no need for sorrow in light of the power of God soon to be demonstrated (cf. Luke 7:13; 8:52). The announcement begins with the characteristic *ἰδοῦ* (*idou*, behold), which occurs twenty-six times in this book to draw attention to a particularly important saying. *Ἐνίκησεν* (*enikēsen*, has overcome) appears first in the sentence for emphasis, and the aorist refers possibly to his life as a victory over the powers of evil (global aorist) or, more likely in this context, to his sacrificial death as the great “victory” over Satan (punctiliar force). This is the same verb used in the seven letters for the “overcomer” or “conqueror” and probably means that Jesus’ victory is the basis for ours. It is the cross, as in 5:6, that is the heart of all spiritual power over evil. Here lies the great paradox of Christianity: victory comes from apparent defeat; evil is conquered through the terrible sacrificial suffering of the cross (1 Cor. 15:54). The NT is very clear on this. When Satan placed Christ on the cross, it was his greatest tactical error, for he took part in his own defeat.

Some of the greatest christological themes in this book are found here in 5:5, 6. Verse 5 combines two messianic titles, the lion of Judah and the root of David, drawing on two passages, Gen. 49:9 and Isa. 11:10, often used messianically by the Jews. [9] The first title is stated by the elder himself. As the victor, Jesus is *ὁ λέων* (*ho leōn*, the lion), the most mentioned animal in the OT (150 times in the LXX), often used in a figurative sense for power and strength (a symbol for the Davidic throne in 1 Kings 10:19–20) or for carnivorous menace (the “devil” as a “roaring lion looking for someone to devour,” 1 Pet. 5:8). Yahweh as divine warrior is often depicted as a lion (Job 10:16; Isa. 31:4; Jer. 50:44; Hos. 5:14; Amos 3:8), and Jesus now assumes that role as divine warrior.

This “lion” has a twofold qualifier: first, he is “of the tribe of Judah,” and second, he is “the root of David.” The “lion of the tribe of Judah” stems from Gen. 49:9–10, “You are a lion’s cub, O Judah; you return from the prey, my son. Like a lion he crouches and lies down, like a lioness—who dares to rouse him? The scepter will not depart from Judah, and the ruler’s staff from between his feet, until he comes to whom it belongs and the obedience of the nations is his.” Genesis 49:8 lends this a military overtone, discussing “your hand on the necks of your enemies,” a metaphor perhaps borrowed in this context of the “victory of Christ.” Judah there is compared to a young lion growing in his strength, capturing his prey, and then returning to rest in his lair. Verse 10 is the key; the phrase “to whom it belongs” is *לַאֲדֹנָי* (*šîlōh*) in Hebrew, and so in later Judaism it was interpreted in a messianic direction (e.g., T. Judah 24.5; 2 Esdr. [4 Ezra] 12:31–34). It is the Messiah’s military prowess and victory over his enemies that are celebrated. [10]

Jesus as the *ῥίζα Δαυίδ* (*hē rhiza David*, root of David) is taken from Isa. 11:1, another text interpreted messianically by the Jews: “A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit”; and from 11:10, “In that day the Root of Jesse will stand as a banner for the peoples.” This is another military passage, as in 11:4b, “He will strike the earth with the rod of his mouth; with the breath of his lips he will slay the wicked.” In Jewish apocalyptic this was seen as a reference to the conquering messiah who would destroy the enemies of Israel (e.g., 2 Esdr. [4 Ezra] 12:32; Sir. 47:22). Thus far it seems Jesus will destroy the nations, certainly a theme

of this book. However, the next verse will qualify this and give the great Christian paradox—Jesus has “conquered” primarily not through military might, though that is to come, but through his sacrificial death (5:6, 9, 12). The Davidic roots of Jesus as the royal Messiah are often emphasized in the Gospels (e.g., Matt. 1:1, 20; 9:27; 12:23; 15:22; 20:30, 31). Here the Davidic office of Jesus is found also in 3:7 (holding “the keys of David”) and 22:16 (“I am the Root and the Offspring of David”). As Bauckham (1993a: 67–69) points out, the military side of the Davidic imagery predominates in this book. As the royal Messiah, Jesus wages a messianic war against evil, and the major weapon that defeats the enemies of God is the cross. This cosmic victory enables him “to open” the scroll.^[11]

iii. The Lamb Takes the Scroll (5:6–10)

(1) Lamb Described (5:6)

The third καὶ εἶδον (*kai eidon*, then I saw) after 5:1, 2 leads into the centerpiece of the whole chapter. Because 5:5 is grammatically linked to 5:2–4, we must place 5:6 in the next section; but in reality the two verses are inextricably linked. When John looks further, he sees ἀρνίον ἑστηκὸς ὡς ἐσφαγμένον (*arnion hestēkos hōs esphagmenon*, a Lamb standing as if slain). This is one of the most beautiful mixed metaphors in all the Bible—the lion (5:5) is a lamb! The direction of the transformation is very important; the final stage is the lamb, not the lion. The paragraph of 5:6–10 tells how the lion of Judah has conquered, not through military power (though that will come) but through paschal sacrifice. McDonald (1996: 37) calls for a “recursive” reading here—Jesus conquers not by physical prowess (like a lion) but by enduring hostility and dying (like a paschal lamb). This also means that the great victory over Satan has already occurred: the cross is the central point of history, and the final battle of Armageddon (16:16; 17:14; 19:14–21) is the culmination of a victory already won. In actuality, Armageddon is more Satan’s final act of defiance than the final victory of Christ. The victory of Christ is at the cross. It is impossible to overstate the magnificent transformation in 5:5–6: the lion is transformed into a lamb that becomes the slain paschal lamb that is again transformed into the conquering ram (the seven horns)! There is even a certain chiasm: lion—lamb—slain lamb—conquering ram.

This Lamb is given an extraordinary place in the vision of chapters 4–5. Remember the concentric circles of chapter 4, with God on the throne at the center and then surrounding him first the four living creatures and then the twenty-four elders. The Lamb is situated “in the midst of the throne and the four living creatures and in the midst of the elders.” Aune (1997: 351–52) notes three possible interpretations of ἐν μέσῳ (*en mesō*, in the midst of): (1) It can mean “in the middle of” or “in the center of” the throne, so that the Lamb is at the center of the action; but the problem is 5:7, where the Lamb “came and took” the scroll from God, suggesting he was some distance away. (2) It can refer to an interval between the participants, so that the Lamb is “between” the throne and the others. (3) It can signify a position “among” or “with” the other characters. Probably the last two describe the scene. The Lamb is near the throne in the area inhabited by the living creatures and elders (contra Hall 1990: 613). Most likely the Lamb stood beside the throne, encircled by the celestial beings (in 22:1 he is on the throne with God),^[12] though we will see that in 7:17 the Lamb is “at the center of the throne.” As J. Charles (1993: 85–97) points out, in the throne imagery of chapter 5 we have another contrast with the imperial court. The “pretensions” of Rome to universal rule are shown to pale in comparison with the universal reign of God and the Lamb.

Carrez (1999: 5–7) says that the Lamb is the central figure of the book, determining the plot

action from the celestial liturgy of chapters 4–5 to the unity of God and the Lamb on the throne in chapter 22. There is considerable debate regarding the meaning of the lamb image. Barker (1995: 501–4) sees the Lamb identified as the paschal lamb of Isa. 53:7 (Swete, R. Charles), the conquering ram (Ford, Kiddle), the Passover lamb (Schüssler Fiorenza, Roloff), or the atoning lamb (Beckwith, Farrer), preferring (with Lohmeyer) to see the Lamb primarily as servant, since the enthronement comes via sacrifice. The data must decide. The image of the lamb is important in the OT and apocalyptic. The primary OT image, of course, is paschal, stemming from the Passover of Exod. 11–12 and the ceremony of Exod. 29/Num. 28–29. In Isa. 53:7 this is used for the Suffering Servant of Yahweh (“a lamb led to the slaughter”), applied to Christ in John 1:29, 35; Acts 8:32; 1 Cor. 5:7; 1 Pet. 1:19. This is the reason the Lamb is described as ἑσλαγμένον, a term meaning “slaughtered” and used of sacrificial animals. It is John who combines the images of paschal sacrifice and suffering servant, and both are behind the image of Jesus as the “slain lamb” here. Thus Christ as the ἀρνίον (*arnion*, lamb) combines the images of the Passover lamb of Exodus and the Suffering Servant lamb of Isaiah.

Verse 6 provides an important clarification of the militaristic overtones of 5:5. There Jesus is seen as the Davidic Messiah destroying the enemies of God. Here we see how the victory was actually achieved, not by sword but by sacrifice. Christ is indeed the conqueror, but his victory was won on the cross. Guthrie (1981: 69–70) believes the Lamb imagery is the “key” to the book, noting that most of the twenty-nine references occur in worship passages and center on salvation more than judgment. The Lamb fulfills the promise of God to establish righteousness. Hofius (1998: 274–80) goes even further, arguing that there is no possibility of interpreting ἀρνίον as a ram, for that introduces militaristic overtones that obscure the central aspect of paschal sacrifice that dominates here. In ancient Greek the term itself never meant “ram,” which is always connoted by a different term. Hofius is correct on this but misses the fact that the ram image is introduced in the “seven horns” of verse 6b. It is part of the transformation techniques used in verses 5–6—from the lion to the lamb to the slain lamb to the conquering ram.

Thus there is a distinct divine warrior aspect to the lamb motif here, stemming from Jewish apocalyptic. Hillyer (1967: 228–29, 232–35) believes that John chose ἀρνίον here to add the idea of authority and triumph to the Isa. 53 image of meekness and submission. He finds six themes in the lamb metaphor in the book: redeemer, object of worship, ruler, judge, pastor, and bridegroom. In 1 Enoch 90.9–12 (see also T. Jos. 19.8–11; T. Ben. 3.8) the horned lamb or ram is a messianic conqueror who leads the people of God to victory. Some commentators on John’s Gospel (see Beasley-Murray 1987: 24–25; Carson 1991: 148–50) believe John the Baptist had this military connotation in mind when he exclaimed, “Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29, 35). This would be supported in this verse when the Lamb is described as having “seven horns,” and this theme is stressed in the military function of the Lamb in 6:16; 17:14. In short, in Revelation the Lamb of God has two aspects, the sacrificial lamb and the military ram, and they are interconnected, standing at the heart of the book and depicting the two sides of God’s activity, his mercy and his justice. As Aune (1997: 368–73) traces the background behind the lamb image, he argues that there are two primary motifs: the lamb as a metaphor for a leader or ruler, and the lamb as a sacrificial metaphor. It is clear that the two are combined here.

The lamb is described further as having κέρατα ἑπτὰ καὶ ὀφθαλμοὺς ἑπτὰ (*kerata hepta kai ophthalmous hepta*, seven horns and seven eyes). As stated above, the “horns” are found in 1 Enoch 90.9 and T. Jos. 19.8 and depict the Warrior Messiah who will destroy his enemies. Horns throughout the ancient world spoke of power and strength, as in Dan. 7:7, 20 for the ten horns of

the fourth beast. In the Apocalypse horns appear frequently (12:3; 13:1, 11; 17:3, 7, 12, 16). The “seven eyes” as in 4:6, 8 symbolize the all-seeing nature of the lamb. In Zech. 4:10 the “seven eyes of the LORD . . . range throughout the earth.” “Seven” throughout this book pictures perfection. The omnipotence (horns) and omniscience (eyes) of the warrior-lamb are here stressed.

The seven eyes are further identified as τὰ [ἑπτὰ] πνεύματα τοῦ θεοῦ (*ta [hepta] pneumatata tou theou*, the [seven] spirits of God). As already discussed in 1:4 and 4:5, these could be angelic beings, but more likely this refers to the “sevenfold Holy Spirit,” described here as ἀπεσταλμένοι εἰς πᾶσαν τὴν γῆν (*apestalmenoi eis pasan tēn gēn*, sent into all the earth). In John 14:26; 15:26; and 16:7 the Holy Spirit is “sent” by the Father and Jesus to carry out their mission to the world, and here that mission theme is extended further.^[13] It is a major motif in the book focusing on what Bauckham (1993b: 238–39) calls “the conversion of the nations.” Elsewhere, “the whole world” is deceived by Satan (12:9), follows him (13:3, 16:14), and is soon to come under judgment (3:10). At the same time, “the eternal gospel” is proclaimed to “the inhabitants of the earth” (14:6–7), and indeed in 11:13 we see the survivors of the great earthquake “give glory to God.” Finally, in the New Jerusalem (21:24) we see that “the nations will walk by its [the city’s] light.” The Spirit thus begins the universal mission of God to “the whole earth” (see also Acts 2:17, 33, where God and the exalted Jesus “pour out” the “promised Holy Spirit”).

(2) Scroll Taken (5:7)

The Lamb of God, already at the center of the throne (5:6), now “takes” the scroll from “the right hand” of God. This phrasing returns to 5:1, which tells us of the scroll in the right hand of God, showing divine control of its contents. Thus there is a transfer of authority from God to the Lamb, who now takes over. Some (H.-P. Müller, Aune, Beale) call this an investiture or transferal of authority from God to the Lamb. Christ is placed “in a position together with his Father as Lord of all affairs in heaven and earth (so 3:21; chaps. 11–14). More precisely, he exercises the Father’s reign, which has now been handed over to him” (Beale 1999: 356, who sees here an echo of Dan. 7:13–14). Due to his sacrifice on the cross, only the Lamb is “worthy” to take the scroll. The emphasis is on the shift from God to the Lamb, who will now execute the divinely mandated plan. Opening the scroll means the judgment of the world and the vindication of the saints.

(3) Worship of the Lamb (5:8–10)

The worship of God in 4:8–11 is now replicated in the universal adoration of the Lamb, first by the living creatures and elders and then in antiphonal fashion by the entire angelic order. As the Lamb “takes” the scroll, the worship leaders of the book, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders, ἔπεσαν ἐνώπιον τοῦ ἀρνίου (*epesan enōpion tou arniou*, fell down before the Lamb). Prostration before the Deity is found throughout the Bible and was the most common form of Jewish worship. It is quite frequent in this book (4:10; 5:14; 7:11; 11:16; 19:4, 10; 22:8) and demonstrates the basic response of both human and angelic beings to the majesty of God. The Lamb is about to inaugurate the events that will dissolve this present order and institute the final kingdom and glorious reign of God.

Each celestial being has two things, a harp and a golden bowl of incense. As Aune (1997: 355) points out, the scene at first appears awkward, for no one could play a harp while holding a bowl, but ancient vases have been found with Apollo holding both a harp and a bowl in a libation scene. The κιθάραν (*kitharan*, harp) is a lyre with ten or twelve strings used often in temple worship to

accompany hymns. It occurs two other times in Revelation, 14:2 and 15:2, also high points of celestial worship. It was a primary instrument used in singing psalms (Ps. 33:2; 57:8; 98:5; 147:7) and was David's instrument (1 Sam. 16:16). It adds an atmosphere of festive joy to the worship (as in the temple choirs of 1 Chron. 25:1–6; Neh. 12:27). The **ἱάλας χρυσᾶς γεμούσας θυμιαμάτων** (*phialas chrysas gemousas thymiamatōn*, golden bowl filled with incense) appears only in this book in the NT (5:8; 15:7; 16:1, 2, 3, 4, 8, 10, 12, 17; 17:1; 21:9) and refers to a wide-necked saucer, made of gold for religious purposes, and filled with incense. These were the golden bowls placed on the table of the bread of the Presence, alongside gold plates, dishes, and pitchers (Exod. 25:29; 37:16; see also Josephus, *Ant.* 3.6.6 §143). The libation was apparently poured from the pitcher into the bowl. Incense is mentioned in Lev. 24:7, which orders that it be placed alongside the twelve loaves on the table. It is Josephus (*Ant.* 3.6.6 §143) who describes the bowls filled with incense. Aune (1997: 358) believes this combines the bowls with the incense pans, and that this also parallels the Roman use of incense poured into the sacred fire in the imperial court ceremonial. The incense in Jewish worship signified the “sweet-smelling aroma” or acceptability of the sacrifice to God. The angels function throughout this book as priests of the heavenly temple performing cultic duties. Here the incense is αἱ προσευχαὶ τῶν ἁγίων (*hai proseuchai tōn hagiōn*, the prayers of the saints).^[14] In Ps. 141:2 incense symbolizes prayer (also Luke 1:10), and that is the connotation here and in 8:3–4.^[15] There is probably a connection between these prayers and the prayers of 6:9–11 and 8:3–4. The prayers are not only worship but probably also petitions brought before God by the martyred saints for vindication and justice (6:9–11). The outpouring of the trumpet judgments (chaps. 8–9) is God's response to these prayers (8:3–5). This is startling: the judgments of the seals, trumpets, and bowls are in part God's answer to the prayers of the saints!

The leaders of angelic worship (the living creatures and elders) ᾄδουσιν ᾠδὴν καινὴν (*adousin ōdēn kainēn*, sing a new song) in 5:9. The idea of a “new song” to celebrate the sovereignty and worthiness of God is frequent in the Psalms (Ps. 33:3; 40:3; 96:1; 98:1; 144:9; 149:1), where it expresses a new worship inspired by the mercies of God. In Isa. 42:10, however, the “new song” is eschatological and connected to the appearance of the “servant of Yahweh” and the “new things” (Rev. 5:9) God was about to introduce. In 14:3 the “new song” is linked to the coming of the final kingdom, and here the new song celebrates the basis of God's final act, the sacrificial death of the Lamb. The use of **καινός** (eight times in the book) rather than **νέος** (not found in this book) stresses the qualitative rather than the temporal, that is, it is new in kind. This is the adjective used of the “New Jerusalem” and the “new heaven and new earth” throughout the book. For the “new” age soon to appear, there is a “new” kind of song to celebrate its coming.

The song is composed of three parts: the acclamation of the worthiness of the Lamb (5:9b), the salvific work of the Lamb (5:9c), and the effects for the followers of the Lamb (5:10). The first part (“you are worthy”) repeats the celebration of the worthiness of God in 4:11 and continues the consistent theme in the book regarding the unity between God and Christ. It also flows out of the opening question of this chapter, “Who is worthy to break the seals and open the scroll?” (5:2, 4–5). Christ is now to instigate the judgment of God by “taking the scroll” that contains the final history of this age and “opening its seals.” The infinitive λαβεῖν (*labein*, to take) points to the action of verse 7, in which Christ “came and took” the scroll from the hand of God. He now takes over the divine task as judge of the earth (John 5:22, 30; 8:16; 9:39).

The basis (ὅτι, *hoti*, because) of that worthiness is his sacrificial death. Nowhere else in the NT is ἐσφάγης (*esphagēs*, you were slain) used of the death of Christ, but it occurs four times in this book (5:6, 9, 12; 13:8). Most likely it is drawn from Isa. 53:7 LXX, “like a lamb to the slaughter,” and

depicts the sacrificial death of Christ. As stated in Rev. 5:6, the irony is that this death became the victory of the Lamb, and in 13:8 it is the basis of his conquest of the beast and all his followers. As the beast conquers the saints (13:7), he has already been conquered by “the Lamb that was slain from the creation of the world” (13:8).

The sacrifice of the Lamb has also ἡγόρασας (*ēgorasas*, purchased) people τῷ Θεῷ (*tō theō*, for God, a dative of advantage). Combining the imagery of sacrifice and commerce is a centerpiece of NT soteriology. As Schüssler Fiorenza (1985: 73–74) notes, this verb is a commercial metaphor used for the freeing of a prisoner of war from bondage.^[16] Jesus’ death has been a “ransom” payment through which God has “purchased” people for himself (see 1 Cor. 6:19–20; 7:23; 2 Pet. 2:1; Rev. 14:3, 4). The ransom payment is specified in ἐν τῷ αἵματί σου (*en tō haimatī sou*, by your blood), highlighting the sacrificial element. It is common (as Beasley-Murray 1978: 127) to see this as an “emancipation” of people from slavery to sin to a new status as God’s people, built on the Jewish idea of Passover sacrifice as freedom; and this is certainly an aspect of the imagery. Ford (1998: 217) states that this “new song” gives a christological interpretation to the exodus events, with the Lamb effecting a “new exodus” (i.e., redemption) with his blood. Field (*NIDNTT* 1:268) argues, however, that “the main point of emphasis is not the freedom of the redeemed . . . but their new status as slaves of God, bought with a price to do his will.” The “blood” of the Lamb here is the payment rendered to “buy” people for God. Again, we are dealing with a both-and: the redemption effected gives a new status.

The fourfold formula for the nations (ἐκ πάσης Ἰουλῆς καὶ γλώσσης καὶ λαοῦ καὶ ἔθνους, *ek pasēs phylēs kai glōssēs kai laou kai ethnous*, from every tribe and language and people and nation) occurs seven times in the book (5:9; 7:9; 10:11; 11:9; 13:7; 14:6; 17:15) with a different order in each occurrence. As Bauckham (1993b: 326) shows, the phrase is universalistic, stressing all the nations. As 5:10 alludes to Exod. 19:6 on Israel as a “kingdom and priests,” 5:9 here alludes to Exod. 19:5, “out of all the nations you will be my treasured possession.” In other words, the church is constituted by people drawn from all the nations of the earth. Here again we have the mission theme of the book, the proclamation of “the word of God and the testimony of Jesus” (1:1, 9; 5:6; 6:9; 12:17; cf. 14:6, 7) to call the nations to repentance. John then expands Exod. 19:5 with the fourfold formula for the nations drawn from Gen. 10:5, 20, 31 (the table of nations), and especially Dan. 7:14 to allude to that time when all the nations will come under the “everlasting dominion” of the “one like a son of man” (Rev. 1:13; see Bauckham 1993b: 327–29).

The effects of Christ’s salvific work are described in 5:10 in terms again drawn from Exod. 19:6. The context is similar to the other place the Exodus passage is used, Rev. 1:6 (also 20:6), and the point is the same. Christ’s sacrifice has made it possible for all God’s people drawn from the nations of the earth to be both royalty and priests in the new kingdom of God. The saints are corporately a “kingdom” and individually “priests.” As priests they serve him in worship and witness. This makes more explicit the mission theme that is implicit in 1:6. The saints belong τῷ Θεῷ (*tō theō*, a possessive dative, “belonging to God,” as noted by Beckwith 1919: 513) and thus serve him by participating in the universal mission to the nations (5:6, 9). As royalty, they reign with God in his kingdom (see 2:26, 27; 3:21). This is especially emphasized here with the added βασιλεύουσιν ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς (*basileuousin epi tēs gēs*, they are going to reign on the earth; see the additional note for the text-critical discussion). There is a progression to this theme elsewhere in the book. In 11:15, 17, and 19:6 it is God and Christ who reign, and in 20:4, 6, and 22:5 it is the victorious saints who “reign with him.” All the promises given to the people of God in the OT are about to be fulfilled, especially those related to the rule of the people of God in the final kingdom, like Dan. 7:18, 22, 27;^[17] Ps.

49:14. In the NT the saints will “sit on thrones” judging the earth (Rev. 20:4; cf. Matt. 19:28; 1 Cor. 6:2; as well as Rom. 5:17; 2 Tim. 2:12). Moreover, this promise relates both to the millennial reign (Rev. 20:4) and to eternity (22:5). Through the death of Christ as the final victory over evil, we will be kings serving Christ in authority over his creation.

iv. Worship by Angelic Choir (5:11–12)

At first glance this seems part of the previous section, as the angelic host encircles the throne and adds their voices to the elders and living creatures in worship. However, it is introduced by another καὶ εἶδον (*kai eidon*, and I saw) and so forms a new section (with 5:1, 2, 6). The vastness of their number is indicated in μυριάδες μυριάδων καὶ χιλιάδες χιλιάδων (*myriades myriadōn kai chiliades chiliadōn*, ten thousand times ten thousand and a thousand times a thousand), a clear allusion to Dan. 7:10 (where “thousand” precedes “myriad” in both the MT and LXX, the more usual order) describing the infinite number of the heavenly host that attend God. A “myriad” is the highest number known to the Greco-Roman world (about ten thousand). The mention of an innumerable host of angels occurs often in the OT (Deut. 33:2; Job 25:3; Ps. 68:17; 89:7; Dan. 7:10) and intertestamental literature (1 Enoch 14.22–23; 40.1; 2 Bar. 48.10; 2 Esdr. [4 Ezra] 8:21–22). This adds beauty and power to the worship scene, stressing even more the incomparable majesty and splendor of God on his throne. These angels “surround the throne” and form a fourth circle around it (after the rainbow, the living creatures, and the elders, 4:3, 4, 6). John does not just see them but “hears” their ἡφῆν (*phōnēn*, sound or voice), adding further power to the “voice” of acclamation in the scene (note the “loud voice” that introduces the hymn in 5:12).

The hymn itself (5:12) alludes back to the introduction of the Lamb (5:6) and the previous hymn (5:9–10) by being addressed to τὸ ἀρνίον τὸ ἐσφαγμένον (*to arnion to esphagmenon*, the lamb who was slain). The sacrificial death of the Lamb of God is clearly the basis for his worthiness, and in the book as a whole it entails the actual victory over Satan. This alludes back to 4:11, where God is “worthy” of praise; now the Lamb is also “worthy.” The reasons for that worthiness are not spelled out here (as in vv. 4, 9), however, but summed up in the basic work of Christ, his sacrifice. The Lamb is now worthy “to receive” (λαβεῖν, *labein*) a sevenfold praise. The infinitive is the same word used in verse 7, where the Lamb “took” the scroll. It is on that basis that he here “takes” praise upon himself.

The sevenfold acclamation closely resembles the hymn to God of 7:12 but with “wealth” rather than “thanks” (the three terms of 4:11 and the four of 5:13 are also found here). The worship of God is now extended to Christ. The seven can be further divided into a pattern of four celebrating the attributes of Christ (power, wealth, wisdom, strength) and three celebrating the worship due him as a result (honor, glory, praise). As Aune (1997: 364–65) points out, this becomes the royal investiture of Christ, paralleling the prerogatives of God in 1 Chron. 29:11 and the prerogatives given to Nebuchadnezzar by God.^[18] The list itself is linked together by Sharp’s rule, which states that when the first of a list of nouns has the article and the rest do not, they form a conceptual unity. Aune (1997: 365) states that each of the seven “is a metaphorical application to Christ of qualities that belong properly to God.” It thus continues the emphasis on the unity of the Father and the Son.

The first of the seven is δύνανιν (*dynamin*, power; see the discussion in 4:11), and it is interesting that in all the lists of acclamation in which it appears (4:11; 5:12; 7:12; 12:10; 19:1) this is the only one where it is first. Most likely, here it emphasizes the sacrificial death of the Lamb as the “power” by which the forces of evil have been “conquered” (5:5; cf. 12:11; 17:14). πλοῦτον (*plouton*,

wealth) is found only here in the book as a worship attribute. The key to its use may well lie in the only other place the term appears, 18:17, in the funeral dirge mourning the destruction of the “wealth” of the “great city” Babylon/Rome. Throughout the OT and NT there is a general warning against the riches of this world and a call to seek “the treasures of heaven” rather than “the treasures of earth” (Matt. 6:19–21). The only source of true riches lies in Christ, and the incredible earthly wealth of Rome is soon to disappear.

Σοφίαν (*sophian*, wisdom) is also attributed to God in Rev. 7:12. Christ is called “the wisdom of God” in 1 Cor. 1:24, 30, and Col. 2:3 says “all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” are hidden in him. The term was used infrequently in the OT to describe God (e.g., Ps. 104:24; Isa. 31:2; Jer. 10:12) and more often to denote the wisdom he gave to chosen leaders like Joseph (Gen. 41:39), Joshua (Deut. 34:9), Solomon (1 Kings 3:12), or Daniel (Dan. 5:11, 14). In this book “wisdom” points to the God-given ability to interpret the symbols (Rev. 13:18; 17:9). Here the Lamb’s “wisdom” speaks of his choice to become the God-ordained sacrifice for the sins of humankind.

The **ἰσχύν** (*ischyn*, strength) parallels “power” and frames the four essential attributes of the Lamb of God. It is found only here and in the hymn to God in 7:12 (where it is also paired with **δύναμις**). The two terms are therefore used together to heighten the sense of the “power” of God (note the use of four terms in Eph. 1:19–20 to stress the divine power at work). In contrast, the verb cognate in Rev. 12:8 speaks of the dragon as “not strong enough” so that the dragon and his angels “lost their place in heaven.” This is another key concept in the book used to emphasize the sovereign power of Almighty God in bringing this age to a close and defeating the powers of evil once and for all.

The final three terms describe the worship of the Lamb. **[19] Τιμῇ** (*timē*, honor) is paired with **δόξα** (*doxa*, glory) also in 4:11 to describe the worship of God, and in 5:13 “honor and glory” will be accorded to God and the Lamb together. Thus this depicts the exaltation and honor that the Lamb receives from the heavenly host. This is an incredible scene, as the vast array of celestial beings surround the throne (see 5:11 above), recognize his “glory,” and accord him the “honor” that is his due. As already stated, this is part of the great emphasis in the book on the deity of the Lamb who is “worthy” of the same worship as God.

The final term, **εὐλογία** (*eulogian*, blessing or praise), occurs three times in Revelation, once of the “praise” of God (7:12), once of the Lamb (here), and once of the two together (5:13). It is also used in David’s doxology of 1 Chron. 29:11–13 (along with “power,” “glory,” “wealth,” and “honor”) and describes the “praiseworthiness” of the Lamb. In the OT and the Judaism of Jesus’ day, praise was the primary form of worship, as the congregation returned to God the “blessings” he had poured into their lives. The basic form of all Jewish benedictions began, “Blessed be thou, O Lord.” In the NT Jesus is greeted with this acclamation at his triumphal entry, “Blessed is he . . .” (Matt. 21:9; Mark 11:9; John 12:13; cf. Matt. 23:39 and Luke 13:35). Therefore, this is a fitting conclusion to this magnificent hymn, as the angels praise and glorify the Lamb of God.

v. Universal Worship of the Enthroned God and Lamb (5:13–14)

Now every created being in the universe joins the angelic host to offer praise to the Lamb. As in Ps. 103:20–22, the pattern in the hymns of this chapter flows from angels to the heavenly host to all of creation. This concludes not just the worship of the Lamb in chapter 5 but the worship of God and the Lamb in the whole throne room vision of chapters 4–5. Moreover, we have here not only the worship of God and the Lamb together but also all the assembled created beings glorifying the Godhead together. **Πᾶν κτίσμα** (*pan ktisma*, every created being) includes not only intelligent

creatures but all the animal kingdom as well. As in 5:3, the three-tiered universe of Jewish cosmology forms the pattern as we see these beings drawn from heaven, earth, the underworld, and the sea. The unusual order, with the sea mentioned last, may be due to the symbolism of the book, in which the sea represents evil. Therefore, it is placed with the underworld rather than with the earth. Indeed, the imagery of the “abyss” in 9:2, 11; 11:7; 17:8; 20:1, 3 stems from the chaotic waters of the deep, so this would be a natural connection. The added τὰ ἐν αὐτοῖς πάντα (*ta en autois panta*, all that is in them) stresses every single creature in the cosmos—angels, humans, demons, as well as all birds, animals, and fish (the creatures of the three tiers). As throughout the book, all of creation participates in the end of this age (note the symbolism of the living creatures in 4:7).^[20]

The hymn itself is an antiphonal repetition of themes already found in chapters 4–5. It is delivered “to the one seated on the throne and to the Lamb.” The worship of God in chapter 4 and of the Lamb in chapter 5 are now joined together in one final outpouring of praise. This hints that the actions of the rest of the book are accomplished by the Godhead acting together. Father and Son end history together, inhabit the New Jerusalem together (21:22, 23), and are worshiped together. This is the third of four doxologies in the book (with 1:5b–6; 4:9; 7:12—so Aune 1997: 366) and provides a fitting ending for the worship of the throne room vision.

The four items celebrated in the doxology are closely linked to previous doxologies as well as summing up the items of praise in the hymns of chapters 4 and 5. Unlike the seven acclamations in verse 12, the article is repeated before each item, giving each one separate emphasis. Εὐλογίαν (*eulogian*, praise) ended the previous worship scene (5:12) and so ties the two closely together (it occurs twice in a row). Its final appearance in the book occurs in the doxology to God in 7:12. Therefore the “praise of God and the Lamb” is the key aspect of this worship. Ἡ τιμὴ καὶ ἡ δόξα (*hē timē kai hē doxa*, honor and glory) appear for the third time in these chapters (4:9; 5:12; “glory” also appears in the doxology of 1:6) and draws together the theme of praiseworthiness evident throughout the worship of God and the Lamb. Κράτος (*kratos*, might) appears for the first time in these chapters but also occurs in the doxology of 1:6. It is probably intended to sum up the δύναμιν . . . ἰσχύιν (*dynamin . . . ischyn*, power . . . strength) of the sevenfold worship in verse 12. In short, we have three elements: the “praise” itself, the reason for the praise (“honor and glory”), and that aspect of divine sovereignty by the Lamb (“might”) that will be shortly demonstrated in the seals, trumpets, and bowls.

Fittingly, in 5:14 the same “four living creatures” who uttered the first doxology (4:8) close the doxological praise of 5:13. However, the Ἀμήν (*Amēn*, Amen) does not just conclude the doxology of 5:13 but acts also as a fitting conclusion for the entire worship scene of chapters 4–5. This term is used often in the book to conclude worship (1:6, 7 [see discussion there]; 3:14; 5:14; 7:12; 19:4; 22:20, 21) and functions as an affirmation of the truths stated. When they close the worship, the elders for a final time ἔπεσαν καὶ προσεκύνησαν (*epesen kai prosekynēsen*, fall down and worship). The two terms also function to draw together the terms for worship in these chapters. In 4:10 and 5:8 ἔπεσαν is used for the prostration of the elders (and living creatures also in 5:8) before God and the Lamb, and προσεκύνησαν also occurs in 4:10 for the “worship” of the elders. Thus this final scene functions to sum up the worship of these two chapters.

Summary and Contextualization

Like chapter 4, this is one of the most incredible chapters in Scripture, touching on many themes

—eschatology, Christology, soteriology, and worship. Eschatology is the message of 5:1–4, the deep desire to see the seals opened and the scroll detailing the end of this age and final triumph of God finally opened. When John weeps that no one is “worthy” to open the scroll, we are to weep with him. A major theme of this book is “Come, Lord Jesus” (22:17, 20). We must all ask ourselves if we long for his return and remain ready for it in our Christian lives.

The Christology of this passage is awe-inspiring. Only the Gospel of John parallels this book for its high Christology. Jesus is near the throne with God, and he shares all of the attributes and acclamations with God. This is deliberate; it is clear that a major thrust is the deity of Christ. Also, we have this wondrous juxtaposition of the divine warrior imagery of Jesus as “the lion of Judah” with the paschal imagery of Jesus as the “Lamb that was slain.” Just the thought that the lion becomes the slain lamb that becomes the conquering ram is enough to keep us on our knees for the rest of our lives.

The combination of soteriology with eschatology is the next wondrous theme. Jesus is first of all the Lamb whose blood both ransomed us and gave us freedom but also purchased us to be God’s possession. But second, that death became his eternal victory. Through it he “conquered” Satan once for all. The message of this book is that the victory over evil has already been achieved at the cross. The eschaton is simply the final manifestation of that victory and the final destruction of those who have already been conquered.

The worship of the Lamb in chapter 5 parallels that of God in chapter 4, and everything said here applies to our worship of Christ. Christians are guilty of the syndrome “Your Jesus is too small.” We have made Jesus our “big brother” and “friend” to such an extent that we have lost the sense that he is also our sovereign Lord. We must recapture the realization that he too is our God and worthy of worship at the deepest level. Like Yahweh, he deserves our praise and gratitude for his sovereignty and for the great victory won at the cross.

Finally, Rowland (1999: 352) finds another aspect here. God’s choice of the lamb means he does not turn to the mighty but to the victims, not to the strong but to the weak, yielding a different outlook on “success and the exercise of power.” This is an important message for “a culture of self-aggrandizement.” Revelation unmasks human culture and the violence it institutionalizes. This is an important lesson for a church that has all too often chosen the secular way rather than the divine way, where leaders frequently become dictators rather than servants.

Additional Notes

5:1. ἔσωθεν καὶ ὀπίσθεν: This language was appropriate for scrolls, but with the appearance of codices (books) it seemed clumsy to later scribes. Therefore other readings appeared, especially ἔσωθεν καὶ ἔξωθεν (P 046 1006 1611 1854 2053 etc.), which fit the codex image better. Also, ἔμπροσθεν καὶ ὀπίσθεν appears in $\square$ cops^a Origen^{2/4} in conformity to Ezek. 2:10 LXX. However, the above reading is found in A 1 69 1828^{mg} 2057 2059 etc. and best explains the others. In addition Zahn (1953: 3.405–6) argues that a comma should be placed before καὶ ὀπίσθεν, thereby placing it with “sealed” (“sealed with seven seals on the back”) rather than “written” (“written on the front and the back”). While possible, it is unlikely, for in the NT ὀπίσθεν normally modifies the preceding verb rather than the following, and the two (“in the front and back”) more likely form a word pair (as in Ezek. 2:10).

5:6. It is difficult to know whether to accept ἑπτὰ in the phrase “[seven] spirits of God” (so $\square$ ²⁴ 2053 1854 046 $\square$ it^{81g} arm et al.) or omit it (so A P^{vid} 1 1006 1611 it^{ar} vg eth et al.). There is perhaps slightly stronger manuscript support for the inclusion of ἑπτὰ, but the internal criteria are evenly balanced: it could have been left out because later scribes were confused by the two previous uses of “seven” in the verse and so skipped over it, or it could have been inserted as a result of influence from the “seven spirits” in 1:4; 3:1; and 4:5. On the whole, I cautiously accept its presence in the verse, while agreeing with Beale (1999: 356) that the meaning of the verse is unchanged either way.

5:7. ἦλθεν καὶ ἐλήληεν: Here we have another interesting combination of an aorist followed by a perfect tense (see also 3:3; 8:5; 11:17

with εἴληα). While many believe the perfect is aoristic (see BDF §343; Beckwith 1919: 511), others believe the perfect “has taken” here points to “the abiding results” of the Lamb’s “coming” to God (see Swete 1911: 79). Since there are so many instances in the book where an aorist is combined with a perfect, it is probably best to follow S. Thompson (1985: 44), who says the numerous examples are probably Semitisms and should be taken with aoristic force. However, one more possibility must be considered. Utilizing aspect theory (see Porter 1994: 23, 302), the aorist could be called “backgrounding” (supporting material) and the perfect “frontgrounding” (the prominent feature in the narrative). Hence the emphasis would be on the Lamb “taking” the scroll, and the “came” is the background action that made the key act possible. This also fits the repetition of “take” in 5:8, 9, showing that the Lamb “taking” the scroll dominates the ensuing verses.

5:8. αἶψιον: Some (R. Charles 1920: 1.144; Beckwith 1919: 512) argue that this clause is a gloss imported from 8:3 because the atmosphere is one of praise rather than prayer, and because the scene here is heavenly rather than earthly (thus prayer does not fit). However, prayer very much fits this scene in its OT as well as its NT framework. For prayers to be brought up to the heavenly Christ would be quite natural. There is insufficient reason (there is no manuscript evidence at all for the omission of this clause here) to take this as a gloss.

5:9. The text-critical problem here is essential for the identification of the elders in chapters 4–5. If the text should read ἡγόρασας τῷ θεῷ ἡμᾶς with 1611 1006 046² et al. (94 2344 et al. place ἡμᾶς before τῷ θεῷ), then the twenty-four elders (5:8) are indeed human rather than angels. There are several problems with this, however, and most prefer to omit “us.” Although there is not a lot of manuscript evidence for “purchased for God” (A^{eth}), Metzger (1994: 666) is probably correct in asserting that the shorter reading best explains the longer. Later scribes provided an object to tell the reader who was “purchased for God,” so the original most likely was simply “purchased for God.” Moreover, if “us” is part of the text, then the four living creatures as well as the elders (5:8) would have been redeemed, and the living creatures are certainly celestial beings.

5:10. βασιλεύσουσιν: There are three readings for “they shall reign” here. The first plural βασιλεύσομεν is based on inferior readings (2432 it^{dem} et al.) and is unlikely. The other two have nearly equal manuscript support. The future βασιλεύσουσιν is supported by P 1 94 1828 1854 et al., and the present βασιλεύουσιν is supported by A 046 1006 1611 et al. It is a difficult decision, because the present would probably be futuristic, “they are going to reign”; hence, it would have nearly identical force to the future. Due to the superiority of A and the others in 5:9, I tentatively side with the futuristic present here. Moreover, it is the most difficult reading, that is, a present force does not make sense, and so later scribes changed it to a future tense to make the future reign of the believers more evident.

2. Opening the Seals (6:1–8:1)

In one sense, the opening of the six seals flows naturally out of chapters 4–5, concluding with the worthiness of the Lamb to open the seals. This is supported by the twofold formula used in the first four seals, with the Lamb opening each in turn and then one of the four living creatures commanding each horse to “come” forth. In another sense, it is intimately connected to the central section of the book, the three great judgments of God—the seals, trumpets and bowls—in chapters 6–16. The structure of this book is almost impossible to pin down. Each section is intimately related to its surrounding context, and attempts to have major sections and minor sections (e.g., beginning a new section of the book with chap. 6) will always be difficult to uphold. In an ancient work like this, one should not impose a rigid organizational pattern. Most biblical books can be organized differently at several levels. This one is no different. In one sense this section flows naturally from chapter 5, and details the seals that Christ is “worthy” to open. In another sense, it begins the central section of the book—the seals, trumpets, and bowls.

The seven seals are preliminary judgments on the earth that prepare for the trumpets and bowls. Like the others, they divide naturally into two parts, the first four (judgments on the earth) and the final three (cosmic judgments). All three series of judgments end with the eschaton. It is also important to realize that the scroll is not opened up until all seven seals are opened. Therefore, these are preliminary, and the contents of the scroll are concerned more with the trumpets, bowls, and ensuing events of chapters 17–20: the divine plan for ending human history and beginning the eternal age.

There is a great deal of debate regarding the progression between the three septets. Thomas (1993: 52–56) argues that the best approach is telescoping or dovetailing, in which the seventh seal encompasses the trumpets and the seventh trumpet encompasses the bowls. Thus the seventh of each does end at the eschaton. This is viable but does not explain the exact repetition in the order of the first four trumpets and bowls as well as the sixth seal, which also points to the eschaton. It is better to see them as cycles, thus recapitulation. D. Davis (1973: 152–57) points out that the seventh in each series ends with a storm theophany; the sixth seal is at the threshold of the parousia; and the seventh trumpet shows the impact of the parousia. Steinmann (1992: 70–76) argues that the sixth of each series form a “tripartite unity,” favoring a recapitulation approach. Also, since each one intensifies the other (the seals affect a quarter of the earth, the trumpets a third of the earth, and the bowls the whole earth), it is best to see the cycles proceeding via a progressive intensification. The seals, trumpets, and bowls are a prime example of Caird’s well-written statement (1966: 106),

The unity of John’s book . . . is neither chronological nor arithmetical, but artistic, like that of a musical theme with variations, each variation adding something new to the significance of the whole composition. This is the only view which does adequate justice to the double fact that each new series of visions both recapitulates and develops the themes already stated in what has gone before.

As many have noted (R. Charles, Lohmeyer, Glasson, Beasley-Murray, Court, Kerkeslager, Giesen, most building on Vos 1965: 181–92 with his detailed study of the parallels) the seals follow the same pattern of judgment preceding the parousia that is seen in the eschatological discourse of Mark 13 and parallels. The thematic parallels are striking—war, international strife, famine, death, persecution, earthquakes, and cosmic disturbances. I am not as certain as they are, however, that

John here shows direct literary dependence on the Olivet discourse. The language of Rev. 6 does not show sufficient similarities to Mark 13 and its parallels to have a direct literary connection. Rather, while Jesus' eschatological discourse was a major source of the imagery, it was one of several behind the details chosen by God in these visions. The idea of the persecution of God's people, divine judgment of the evildoers, and cosmic signs preceding the eschaton is quite common from Daniel and Zechariah through the intertestamental apocalypses. Thus the seals recapitulate common themes and apply them to the end-time scenario of these visions.

This section also contains the first of three interludes, narrative portions that interrupt the seals, trumpets, and bowls: 7:1–17; 10:1–11:13; and 12:1–14:20. These three interludes function as illustrative vignettes (see the introduction to this book) intended to describe the atmosphere of this eschatological period and to show the place of the church in these events. They also, like chapter 7, are part of the narrative flow of the work. Chapter 7 has two narrative purposes: it continues God's answer to the prayers of the saints for vindication by showing that God seals those still alive for himself, and it frames (with chaps. 4–5) the seal judgments with worship and celebration of the triumphant God.

A great deal of work has been done on the purposes of the three great judgments of the seals, trumpets, and bowls. I see seven major themes: (1) They are indeed judgments from God poured out upon the earth-dwellers.^[1] The saints, as we know from 3:10; 7:1–8; 9:4; and 16:2, are protected from these judgments. The principle is that of *lex talionis*, the “law of retribution” that governed not only Roman law but the laws of the OT. God in these judgments is “just” in giving the earth-dwellers what they deserve (16:5–7). (2) These judgments are God's response to the imprecatory prayers of the saints for justice and vengeance (5:8; 6:9–11; 8:3–5). (3) The sovereignty of God is stressed throughout, seen especially in the frequent use of ἑδόθη (*edothē*, was given; 6:2, 4, 8; 7:2; 8:2, 3; 9:1, 3, 5; 13:5, 7, 14, 15) to show that even the demonic forces can do nothing without divine authorization. (4) Yet throughout this section God does not need to command evil to do his will but simply allows it to operate. In 6:1–8 he lets human depravity come full circle, as lust for conquest leads to civil war and then to the death of one-fourth of humankind. In the fifth and sixth trumpets (9:1–19) he allows the demons to do what they have done throughout the Gospels: torture and kill their own followers. (5) The response of the earth-dwellers proves their total depravity, for they (with the one exception of 11:13) refuse to repent and prefer to worship the very demonic powers that have turned against them (9:20–21; 16:9, 11). (6) At the same time, the outpouring of judgment has a redemptive purpose and is part of the final chance to repent (9:20; 14:6–7; 16:9, 11). God's judgments are an act of mercy, for he shows the powerlessness of the earthly gods (as in the Egyptian plagues; see the introduction to chap. 8) and calls upon sinful humankind to “fear God and give him glory, because the hour of his judgment has come” (14:7). In this way the judgments are part of God's mission to the world.^[2] The tension between God's offer of repentance and the rejection of that offer is part of the message of this book. (7) There is a progressive dismantling of creation, as the created order is shaken in the seals (6:12–14), then in the trumpets and bowls first one-third and then the whole of this created world are virtually overthrown. This prepares for the final consummation when this world order will be destroyed (20:11; 21:1).

a. First Six Seals (6:1–17)

The one “worthy to open the seals” has been found (5:2, 5), and the events that will end world history and usher in the eschaton are ready to begin. We must remember that the scroll will not be opened until all seven seals are broken, so 6:1–8:1 is a series of preliminary judgments that usher in the final end-time events. As explained in the preceding section, the judgment septets are organized in a four-three pattern, with the first four comprising earthly judgments. These are the well-known “four horsemen of the Apocalypse” (6:1–8). These four judgments flow out of chapter 5; in each the Lamb opens the seal, then one of the four living creatures commands the horse to come forth, and the figure arrives. The primary theme is divine sovereignty, as the Lamb initiates the event, and in three of them the divine passive “was given” (6:2, 4, 8) controls the action. This means that the activities of the horsemen take place only as authorized by God. Christ controls the process from the throne of God, and the living creature commands the situation. The first four seals center on the depravity of mankind. As the commentary will show, the progression of the four seals is from lust to conquest (the first seal) to civil war (the second seal) to famine (the third seal) to pestilence and death (the fourth seal). This is the natural progression of man’s inhumanity to man. In other words, God simply allows human sin to come full circle, turn in upon itself, and self-destruct.

The four horsemen are followed by the cosmic scene in the fifth and sixth seals. The fifth seal turns from the earthly scene of devastation caused by total depravity to the heavenly scene of the martyred saints who cry out for vindication and vengeance for what their tormenters have done to them. In the first set of four judgments, the sinners destroy themselves; in the second, three-judgment set, the saints have been destroyed by the sinners. Beale suggests (1999: 389–90) that the sufferings visited upon the evildoers in 6:1–8 are visited upon the saints by the evildoers in the form of persecution (the believers are “slain” [vv. 4, 9] and “killed” [vv. 8, 11]; famine is described in 7:16). Yet even in their death the saints have triumphed, for they are given white robes, proleptic of the victory chronicled in 12:11 (“They overcame [the dragon] . . . [in that] they did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death”). Their plea for vengeance is also answered quickly, for after the sixth seal the very forces that have persecuted the saints are cowering in fear before the face of God and the wrath of the Lamb (6:15–17).

The sixth seal, as will be argued, portrays the final events that presage the eschaton itself, namely the shaking of the heavens (cf. Matt. 24:29–30 par.). The saints have called for vindication, and God is now providing it. He vindicates his name in the cosmic events of vv. 12–14 and then vindicates the saints by punishing their tormenters in vv. 15–17. This event does not occur immediately after the fifth seal. Chronology is not an issue here. In verse 11 the saints are told to “wait” until the “full number” of their fellow martyrs has been “completed.” So the vindication occurs as that final event ushering in the end of history. The shaking of the heavens draws together many apocalyptic themes (the earthquake, the storm theophany, the rolling up of the universe) that will reverberate throughout Revelation (8:5; 11:13; 16:18–20) as part of the ending of this present world order (20:11; 21:1) to make way for the new order. The terror of the powers and armies of this world (vv. 15–17) prepares for the final battle of 19:19–21. The saints have every reason to rejoice in this “great day of wrath,” while the sinners have even more reason to fear.

- i. Four horsemen (6:1–8)
 - (1) First horseman—white (6:1–2)
 - (2) Second horseman—red (6:3–4)
 - (3) Third horseman—black (6:5–6)
 - (4) Fourth horseman—pale green (6:7–8)
- ii. Fifth seal—martyred saints (6:9–11)
- iii. Sixth seal—the shaking of the heavens (6:12–17)
 - (1) Cosmic signs (6:12–14)
 - (2) Terror of earth-dwellers (6:15–17)

Exegesis and Exposition

¹And I saw when the Lamb opened the first of the seven seals, and I heard one of the four living creatures speak in a voice like thunder, “Come!” ²And I looked, and behold there was a white horse, and the one sitting on it had a bow, and God gave him a crown, and he departed conquering and to conquer.

³When he opened the second seal, I heard the second living creature say, “Come!” ⁴And another horse came out; it was fiery red. God gave the one sitting on it power to take peace from the earth and to cause people to slay one another, and he gave him a large sword.

⁵When he opened the third seal, I heard the third living creature say, “Come!” And I looked, and behold there was a black horse, and the one sitting on it had a pair of scales in his hand. ⁶Then I heard what was like a voice in the midst of the four living creatures saying, “A quart of wheat for a day’s wages, and three quarts of barley for a day’s wages, and do not damage the oil and the wine.”

⁷When he opened the fourth seal, I heard the voice of the fourth living creature say, “Come!” ⁸And I looked, and behold a horse that was pale green like a corpse, and the one sitting atop it was named “Death,” and Hades was following behind it. God gave them authority over a quarter of the earth, to kill with sword, and with famine, and with pestilence, and by wild animals.

⁹And when he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain on account of the word of God and the witness they had maintained. ¹⁰And they cried out with a loud voice saying, “How long, O Sovereign, holy and true, are you not going to judge and avenge our blood against those who inhabit the earth?” ¹¹And God gave each of them a white robe and told them to rest and wait a short time longer until the number of their fellow slaves, that is, their brothers and sisters who are about to die just as they had, is to be completed.

¹²And I saw that when he opened the sixth seal, a great earthquake occurred, and the sun became black like sackcloth and the whole moon red like blood. ¹³And the stars of heaven fell on the earth like spring figs drop from a tree shaken by a strong wind. ¹⁴And the sky was split apart and rolled up like a scroll, and every mountain and island was removed from its place.

¹⁵Then the kings of the earth and the officers of the court and the military tribunes and the wealthy and the mighty and every slave and free person hid themselves in the caves and the rocks of the mountains. ¹⁶And they called to the mountains and the rocks, “Fall on us and hide us from the face of the one who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb, ¹⁷because the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?”

i. Four Horsemen (6:1–8)

The imagery of four horsemen is drawn from Zech. 1:7–11 and 6:1–8, in which four chariots are drawn by red, black, white, and dappled gray horses (or red, red, brown, and white horses for 1:8). In Zechariah the chariots go throughout the earth, finding “peace and rest” predominating. There is a deliberate contrast with the horsemen here that go out to bring war and pestilence to humankind. Also, the colors differ in their symbolism. In Zechariah the colors symbolize the four winds, while here they symbolize the death and destruction associated with the judgments. Poirier (1999: 260–61) adds that the image also builds on Jer. 15:2 and Ezek. 5:12 LXX. All three passages have the same themes—captivity, sword, famine, death. These four horsemen flow together, as the action proceeds from the lust for conquest to civil war to famine to pestilence and death.^[1] In this sense God is not so much pouring down judgment on the earth-dwellers as allowing their depravity to come full circle (so O’Donovan 1986: 71–73). This is a common theme in this book, as sin turns upon itself and self-destructs.^[2]

(1) First Horseman—White (6:1–2)

The opening formula connects this intimately with the “worthy Lamb” of chapter 5 who now proceeds to open the seals one at a time. It begins with the characteristic **καὶ εἶδον** (*kai eidon*, and I saw), marking a minor break to a new section. The use of the temporal **ὅτε** (*hote*, when) at first glance seems clumsy, but it begins each of the seals, so it becomes a minor marker leading into each seal. Each event in the seal judgments begins with the Lamb’s action of opening the seal. He inaugurates the action, in keeping with chapter 5, as the divine judge. While John “sees” the Lamb open the seal, he “hears” the command of the living creature. Throughout the book all of John’s senses are involved in these visions. The same occurs in 6:5–6 as well as in chapter 7, where John “sees” the angels holding back the winds of destruction and “hears” the number of the saints who are sealed. Following the breaking of the “first”^[3] seal, one of the “four living creatures” in a **φωνῇ βροντῆς** (*phōnē brontēs*, voice like thunder)^[4] utters the command that also governs the action of each of these first four seals, **Ἔρχου** (*erchou*, come). Throughout the book the living creatures lead heavenly worship (4:8–9; 5:8–10, 14; 19:4), form part of the throne retinue (4:6; 5:6, 11; 7:11; 14:3), and implement divine judgments (6:1, 3, 5, 6, 7; 15:7). Since each of the four “horse” visions is introduced by the corresponding numbered living creature, we know the judgment comes from the throne of God. The presence of the living creatures also ties these first four judgments together into a single whole, and the progression from one to the other is made all the more powerful. The image of a “voice like thunder” is repeated in 14:2 and 19:6, both worship scenes. Here it may invoke the idea of a storm theophany (in 4:5–6 the storm theophany leads to the appearance of the living creatures), as God appears in judgment. The present imperative “come” probably does not carry a great deal of ongoing force but means “come right now.”

With the command, the first horse arrives (6:2). Some scholars (Alford, Hendriksen, Hodges, Bachmann) have argued that the rider on the white horse is Christ, since he is described at his parousia as coming on a white horse (19:11) to destroy his enemies (19:15–16). The imagery of “conquering” then describes the triumph of the gospel (Matt. 24:14), presented as a separate view by some (Sweet 1979: 139 takes it of the conquest of the world by the gospel). Several (Considine 1944: 419–20; Bachmann 1986: 240–47; Bachmann 1998: 260–65; Herzer 1999: 231–38) argue that the first rider is marked off from the other three as a positive (“white” as the color of righteousness) figure “going forth” with a crown (sovereignty) and a bow (the gospel) to conquer (with all the “conqueror” imagery in the book). Also, the second horse is set off as “another” figure, and the summary of Rev. 6:8 recapitulates only the second through fourth horses. Thus the best parallel is Christ in 19:11. However, this does not fit the immediate context and the unity between the four horsemen, for the use of the “white horse” in the two contexts is quite different, and here the rider carries a bow, while there Christ carries a sword. Also, the four horses are too intimately related to one another for the first to differ radically.^[5]

Still others (e.g., Rissi 1964: 414–17; Johnson; Thomas; Wong 1996: 221–25; Beale; MacLeod 1999a: 210) believe the rider is a satanic figure, possibly the Antichrist, and that the first four seals introduce themes of cosmic war and conquest that will be developed in detail later in the book.^[6] Rissi (1964: 414) calls the four horsemen “demonic agents of destruction” and sees the best parallel in Gog of Ezek. 38–39. This is possible, for in Rev. 13:7 God allows the beast to “make war” against the saints and “conquer” them. If the crown and the bow in 6:2 are used as symbols of Apollo, a god associated with prophecy and divination, this would also be possible. I believe the crown and bow picture the Parthians (see below), however, and there is insufficient evidence for this specific an

interpretation at this point in the book.[7]

It is better to see this image as more general, with the riders relating to the human lust for war and its consequences (so Swete, Morris, Roloff, Beasley-Murray, Metzger, Talbert, Giesen, Mounce, Aune). In these four interconnected seals, God's judgment is to allow human depravity to run its course.[8] These are not demonic forces but human. This would be especially poignant in the first century, when the Pax Romana was no true Roman "peace" at all but was a façade built on the Roman sword, that is, their military control of the conquered nations.

The wording is particularly important. First, the rider is described with the unusual expression ὁ καθήμενος (*ho kathēmenos*, the one sitting), a direct parallel to the description of God "sitting on" the throne in 4:2, 3, 9, 10. This rider then represents humankind setting themselves up in the place of God. Next, the critical ἐδόθη (*edothē*, was given) is a divine passive pointing to God's control of the process. This verb is used frequently in the book (6:11; 7:2; 8:2, 3; 9:1, 3, 5; 11:1, 2; 12:14; 13:5, 7, 14, 15; 16:8) and in this section (6:2, 4, 8). It denotes the sovereign power of God over all his creation, even the forces of evil. Everything Satan and his minions do in the book occurs only by divine permission (Beale 1999: 377 calls it "divine authorization to perform a role").

The description of the rider closely resembles the Parthians, the only military force in the ancient world feared by the Romans (so Swete, R. Charles, Lohse, Boring, Mounce, Harrington, Aune) since they had defeated a Roman army twice, in 55 B.C. and A.D. 62. They were a warlike federation of tribes east of the Euphrates (the eastern boundary of the Roman Empire) who were especially famous for their cavalry, as they had perfected the ability to shoot arrows accurately from a charging horse.[9] Since the rider was given a "bow" and "rode out" to conquer, the Parthians provided natural background. They had made several incursions into Roman lands in the 60s and 70s. Moreover, the "crown" would refer to their independence from Rome. Nonetheless, it must be stressed that the Parthians provide only background to the imagery. It is a reference not just to them but to the general propensity of sinful humans to lust for conquest. The phrase νικῶν καὶ ἵνα νικήσῃ (*nikōn kai hina nikēsē*, conquering and to conquer) is an idiom utilizing both a circumstantial participle and a purpose clause to stress that the supreme activity and purpose of this figure is military conquest. The verb is one of the key terms used in the book, concluding each of the seven letters in chapters 2 and 3 as well as describing the war between Satan and the people of God. The key portion is probably 12:12ff. and 13:7, containing the irony that when the beast believes he is "conquering" the saints (13:7), they are actually "conquering" him. This great cosmic war is introduced here with a description of the extent to which war is the ultimate depravity of humanity.

(2) Second Horseman—Red (6:3–4)

The second seal begins the same way the first did, with Christ breaking the seal and opening it, then the second living creature commanding the horse to come forth. The divine control of these horsemen is quite evident in this apocalyptic scene, and the sovereignty of God is once more the controlling theme. Moreover, it seems likely that this is not just judgment that is being poured out. Rather, God is allowing human depravity to come full circle. There is a distinct progression, seen in the parallelism and the movement from one living creature to the next. Moreover, the details fit this progression. Each horse represents an aspect of depravity, and each one leads into the other. In the second horse the lust for conquest turns to civil war, as human depravity turns upon itself and becomes self-destructive.

The second horse (v. 4) is πυρρός (*pyrros*, fiery red), symbolizing the terrible bloodshed and

slaughter to be wrought upon the world. This color appears again in 12:3, where it is the color of the “great dragon,” and there the significance is also the dragon’s hatred and murder of the people of God. The rider is allowed to do three things: take peace from the earth, cause people to kill each other, and use a sword to accomplish this bloody purpose. The three actions are governed by two occurrences of ἐδόθη (*edothē*, was given), indicating divine authorization of the activity; the first one links the first two activities into a single whole. The basis of the warfare then becomes the μάχαιρα μεγάλη (*machaira megalē*, great sword). This is sometimes used for the sharp Roman knife or dagger carried in a sheath at the waist, but here it refers to the Roman “sword” that is a symbol of military might and of the power of life and death that the Romans reserved for themselves alone. Aune (1998a: 396) speaks of *ius gladii*, the “right of the sword” or power of execution reserved only for the emperor and his provincial governors; as he points out (395), this reverses the Roman pretense of Pax Romana, the “peace” inaugurated by Augustus and enforced by the sword. It is “great” both because it is the great sword used in battle and because it has the power to destroy the earth. God, the true “emperor” of all creation, has given this horseman the right to kill.

With the sword, the lust for conquest in the first seal turns to civil war.^[10] First, God allows the rider to “take peace from the earth.” Some have connected this with 2 Thess. 2:6–7, the removal of the “restraining” force that holds back “the man of lawlessness.” This interpretation would be viable if one sees Rev. 6:4 as describing the final period of history. It is more likely, however, that the passage refers to the “wars and rumors of wars” in Mark 13:7–8 that are not the end but the “beginning of birth pangs.” This describes humanity’s propensity for war and for killing one another. The articular τὴν εἰρήνην (*tēn eirēnēn*, peace) concretizes the idea to express the particular civil peace that all people long for. The civil war aspect is especially seen in the next clause, as people slaughter one another. The verb σιλάξουσιν (*sphaxousin*, slay)^[11] is very strong in this context. It does not simply mean to “kill” one another but to “slaughter” each other and so is especially symptomatic of war. The order follows Mark 13:7, as “wars and rumors of war” lead to “nation rising against nation and kingdom against kingdom.” This was the great fear of all ancient (and modern) empires. Alexander the Great’s empire split at his death into four empires (built on his four primary generals), which spent the next two hundred years fighting against one another. Rome was paranoid about civil war, and with good reason. It had endured several, such as the one led by Sulla (88 B.C.) and the one following the assassination of Julius Caesar (which effectively ended the Roman Republic). In A.D. 68–69 there were four different emperors, and the last, Vespasian, saved the empire from self-destruction. This was an oft-repeated tragedy.

(3) Third Horseman—Black (6:5–6)

This begins with the same formulaic introduction as the others. The Lamb opens the seal, and the third living creature calls forth the horse. Here, however, there is one difference, as John adds καὶ εἶδον (*kaieidon*, and I looked) from the first two verses. Since this phrase occurs again in 6:7, the real question is why it is not used in 6:3–4. It is probably absent there to connect the first two seals closely—war and civil war are intimately related. The third and fourth seals describe the effects of war and so are separated by the added “and I looked.” Here we have ἵππος μέλας (*hippos melas*, a black horse), signifying the sorrow and mourning caused by the famine and suffering that follow war. This is repeated in 6:12, where “black as sackcloth” refers to the Jewish garment for mourning.

The details that follow in verse 6 all relate to famine (so R. Charles, Beasley-Murray, P. Hughes, and most commentators). The rider holds ζυγὸν ἐν τῇ χειρὶ αὐτοῦ (*zygon en tē cheiri autou*, a pair of

scales in his hand). These scales were exactly as pictured in ancient texts, a balance beam with a scale at each end. The purpose of scales in the ancient world was to ensure justice (Prov. 16:11, “Honest scales and balances are from the LORD”). The emphasis here is almost certainly upon exorbitant prices caused by famine and the resultant rationing of the food supply. In Lev. 26:26 and Ezek. 4:16, the image of eating bread on the basis of weight symbolized terrible scarcity. During war the conquering army would live off the countryside, often taking the food by force and leaving a denuded countryside in its wake. Famine was the natural result.

Two major examples are given, grain supplies and oil/wine supplies. These are introduced by the mysterious “and I heard [what was] like a voice in the midst of the four living creatures.” John often uses ὥς (*hōs*, as, like) in this way to indicate a mysterious origin (Beckwith 1919: 520—see 8:1; 14:3; 19:1, 6). Note it is not the rider but the celestial beings^[12] that are the source of this voice. The “middle of” the living creatures is probably the throne of God itself. God is clearly still in control. Wheat and barley were the two major sources of food in the Roman Empire. It had long been the practice of Rome’s leaders to give a free portion of grain annually to the city’s poor in order to garner support. Wheat was the better grain and the major staple, and barley was less expensive but also less nutritious. The poor ate barley, while the wealthy ate wheat for the most part. A “denarius” was the average days’ wage for a laborer. A quart of wheat was enough food for one person for a day, and three quarts of barley were barely enough for a small family (there were few small families except among the wealthy in the ancient world). Therefore a man’s entire earnings were barely enough to feed himself, let alone his family, and all the other costs like home or incidentals could not be met. These were famine prices, about ten to twelve times the going rate according to ancient records (Mounce 1998: 144 cites Cicero, *Verr.* 3.81).

Olive oil and wine were important items, though not as critical as wheat and barley. The meaning of τὸ ἔλαιον καὶ τὸν οἶνον μὴ ἀδικήσης (*to elaion kai ton oionon mē adikēsēs*, do not harm the oil and the wine) is debated. The imperative is quite emphatic, “do not damage or spoil” (BAGD 17) it. Yet why these two somewhat minor items? There are several interpretations:

1. Some (Moffatt, Boring, Thomas) think it has a social message. The poor are left with nothing, while the rich have as much oil and wine as they need. But that hardly fits the context, especially with the command “not to harm” coming from the throne itself. Why would God decree that the rich flourish and the poor alone suffer? That would not be the type of judgment found in this book.

2. Others (Beckwith, Beasley-Murray, Roloff) moderate this and say that God is ensuring that the famine will not be too severe, because some staples (like oil and wine) will still be available. Rissi (1964: 409–10) says this stems from the OT depiction of oil and wine as secondary crops (Deut. 7:13; Ps. 104:14–15; Joel 1:10) and therefore as a limitation on the judgment. Another form of this view (Seesemann, *TDNT* 5:165) states that the famine will be limited to just one season of the year (wheat and barley) and will not affect the other seasons. While this is plausible on the basis of the language here, it does not fit the larger context, for the result of these seals (including the famine) is the death of one-quarter of humanity (6:8). The severity is the very point of this. There will never have been a famine like it.

3. Still others (Lohmeyer, Ford, Prigent) interpret the oil and wine as sacramental (see James 5:14) and see this as meaning the believers will be protected from the famine. However, that is reading a lot into this short statement. There is no hint that believers are the recipients of the oil and wine, indeed, no hint that believers are present at all.

4. Another view (see Gregg 1997: 112, who links this with the preterist view) takes this historically of the terrible conditions at the siege of Jerusalem, when starvation prevailed but a

group of rebels led by John Gischala stole the sacred oil and wine used for offerings from the inner temple and had a drinking party (Josephus, *J.W.* 5.13.6 §§562–65). While this is possible, it is unlikely that a group of Christians in the province of Asia would be intended to see this parallel.

5. The solution is probably to be seen in the historical background behind the imagery. In A.D. 92 there was a grain shortage, and Domitian decreed that half the vineyards in the province be cut down in order to increase grain production. This caused such a furor that he had to rescind the order. Cutting down vineyards would hurt production for years to come and would make a famine even more severe. This could be a reference to that type of situation, stressing the severity of the famine conditions and the extremes that people would have to go to in order to alleviate the suffering. Aune (1998a: 399–400) provides a good summary of the many famines that threatened the Roman Empire, so this was a powerful image. In particular, there was a famine in Asia Minor about the same time as Domitian’s edict. As Aune says, one cannot be certain that such events are behind this text, but the imagery here is based on these types of events. As the next seal shows, such attempts to protect the people will be fruitless. The voice from heaven shows that God is behind such severity (see 17:17 for a similar God-sent judgment) and so this forms part of the judgment inherent in the seals.

(4) Fourth Horseman—Pale Green (6:7–8)

This is the culminating seal, and for the final time Christ opens the seal and the fourth living creature calls forth the horse with its rider. At the command there appears a ἵππος χλωρός (*hippos chlōros*, pale horse). This is a yellowish-green color, [13] and while it can refer to “green grass” as in Mark 6:39 and Rev. 8:7, here it is used for the color of disease and death (it was sometimes used for the pallor of a corpse). The rider “atop” [14] this horse is named “Death.” John adds an interesting clause, ὁ ᾗδης ἡκολούθει μετ’ αὐτοῦ (*ho hadēs ēkolouthei met’ [15] autou*, Hades is following after it). Hades here is the evil companion of Death, and they are personified as malignant cosmic forces in this book (1:18; 6:8; 20:13, 14), with “Hades” referring to the grave and possibly to the Greek god of the underworld (especially to those readers with a pagan background). In the LXX θάνατος (*thanatos*, death) often translates the Hebrew word for “pestilence,” which fits the emphasis on “plague” in this fourth seal. Thus there is a double meaning in the term, death by plague. The imagery of “following behind” pictures Hades on foot gathering up the corpses left by Pestilence and Death as they struck victim after victim (see Beasley-Murray 1978: 133–34).

Once more God “gave” (see 6:2, 4) the demonic forces ἐξουσία (*exousia*, authority) or “power” to inflict terrible suffering on humanity. Here this power is exercised over “one-fourth of the earth,” one of the primary images of the seals, trumpets (one-third of the earth), and bowls (the whole earth). Here one-quarter of humanity is ἀποκτείναι (*apokteînai*, put to death) by these twin scourges. The three methods they use summarize the second, third, and fourth seals—“by sword and by famine and by pestilence, and by the wild beasts of the earth.” The “sword” [16] sums up the interconnected first two seals; “famine” is the subject of the third; and “pestilence” [17] sums up this fourth seal. In that light, it is hard to decide whether the first four seals are progressively more intense. Since this summarizes the others, it is likely that all four together kill one-fourth of the human race, today about 1.5 billion people! That is more than all the wars of the last two hundred years put together. The fourth of the judgments, “the wild beasts of the earth,” is here due to the OT source for these plagues, Ezek. 14:21: “How much worse will it be when I send against Jerusalem my four dreadful judgments—sword and famine and wild beasts and plague” (cf. Ezek. 14:12–23). However, it still has relevance, for the carrion birds of Rev. 19:17–18, 21 parallel the carnivorous

predators in Ezek. 14. Both picture the terrible severity of the judgments, as those weakened by famine and plague become the prey for wild animals. Ezekiel 14:12–23 details Yahweh’s contemplating four potential judgments against Israel for its idolatry and unrighteous behavior. The four judgments flow from famine (14:13–14) to wild beasts (14:15–16) to sword (14:17–18) and finally to plague (14:19–20). Then Jerusalem is told that it will indeed receive all four judgments in 14:21. Verses 22–23 encourage the righteous remnant that they will be spared due to their righteous conduct. No such encouragement is found here. Death will overtake wicked humanity, and they will not escape the judgment of God.^[18] Mounce (1998: 145–46) has an excellent summary:

Reviewing the various interpretations assigned to the Four Horsemen tends to rob the contemporary reader of the dramatic nature of the vision itself. It is good to place oneself back in one of the seven churches and listen to the visions as they are being read. Instead of discussing the probable significance of each of the four colored horses those first listeners would have recoiled in terror as war, bloodshed, famine, and death galloped furiously across the stage of their imagination.

ii. Fifth Seal—Martyred Saints (6:9–11)

Heil (1993: 222–23, 242–43) points out that this is the only prayer of supplication in Revelation. He believes the “slaughter” occurred as the result of the “slaughter” of the first four seals (6:4) and that there is contrast between the sword given to their enemies and the white robe given to the martyred saints. Thus this is a turning point in the book, summarizing the faithful witness of the first part, the conflict of the middle portion, and the promise and vindication of the final section. From the judgment experienced by the earth-dwellers, the scene now shifts to heaven. The idea of heaven as a temple occurs frequently in this book (11:19; 14:17; 15:5; 16:17) and in the OT (Ps. 11:4; Isa. 6:1; Hab. 2:20; Mic. 1:2, cf. T. Levi 18.6), and the altar is always in the heavenly temple (Rev. 8:3, 5; 14:18). Behind the idea of the heavenly temple is very likely the apocalyptic vision in Ezek. 40–48. Also, the subject changes to what the earth-dwellers have done to the saints and to the issue of the justice of God (the judgment of God was the theme in the first four seals). As the only prayer of supplication in the Apocalypse (see above), it is important to realize that it is an imprecatory prayer for vengeance. The subject is martyrdom, another major theme in the book. In the eschatological discourse Jesus warned his followers to expect terrible persecution from councils, synagogues, and secular authorities and even betrayal from family members resulting in death (Mark 13:9–13). This reflects that message. The connection between martyrdom and judgment is appropriate, for one of the primary emphases in the book is *lex talionis* (the law of retribution), defending why God has to judge evil humanity. In fact, 6:15–17 details God’s response to these imprecatory prayers on the part of the martyred saints.

As Christ opens the fifth seal, John “sees” (another use of εἶδον [*eidon*, I saw] to introduce a further aspect of the vision)^[19] ὑποκάτω τοῦ θυσιαστηρίου τὰς ψυχὰς (*hypokatō tou thysiastēriou tas psychas*, souls under the altar). The use of ψυχὰς here is interesting, for it normally refers to the whole person. Sand (EDNT 3:501) believes that it indicates the life force that lives on after physical death (as in 8:9 of animals; cf. Luke 9:24; Acts 20:10). The imagery of these souls “under the altar” has occasioned much discussion. No one doubts that it refers to the sacrificial system, where the blood of the sacrificial victim is poured “under the altar,” but there is some debate as to which altar is meant. The “blood under the altar” would favor a reference to the altar of burnt offering (so Swete, Krodell, Sweet, Aune), while the prayers directed at the altar would favor a reference to the altar of incense (so Beckwith, R. Charles, Ladd, Morris, Johnson, Beale). In favor of the latter is that the other references to an “altar” in the book (8:3, 5; 9:13; 11:1; 14:18; 16:7) refer to the altar of

incense (and on the Day of Atonement blood was poured on this altar), and here the souls rather than blood are “under the altar.” In favor of the altar of burnt offering is the imagery of the souls under the altar rather than on top of it and of the sacrificial imagery in the concept here (Aune 1998a: 405–6 believes that 11:1 and 16:7 also refer to the altar of burnt offering). Mounce (1998: 146–47) believes that the themes of both sacrifice and prayer in 6:9–10 favor a double meaning, that both altars are intended. However, there is no mention of an altar in verse 10, and the emphasis in verse 9 seems most likely to refer to the altar of burnt offering here (due to the imagery of the souls “under” the altar).^[20] Still, Mounce is correct that there is just one altar in Revelation and it combines both functions (see on 8:3). The “soul,” like “blood,” was seen as a symbol of life, and thus the two function as synonyms. In Exod. 29:10–14 and Lev. 4:3–12, the ceremony for the sin offering involved bringing a young bull without blemish to the altar, laying hands on it to identify the sinner with the bull and transfer his sins to it, and then slaughtering it as a substitute for those sins. Some of the blood was placed on the horns of the altar, and the rest was poured at the base of the altar. Here the martyred saints are clearly pictured as those sacrificed for Christ.

They have been ἐσφαγμένων (*esphagmenōn*, slaughtered)^[21] “on account of the word of God and the testimony they had maintained.” This is based on a formula that occurs four times in the book (1:2, 9; 6:9; 20:4), with 12:17 and 14:12 paraphrasing the formula. As stated at 1:2, this formula shows the prophetic nature of the book and the participation of the saints in the apocalyptic presence of God via their witness. While in 1:1 the phrase “testimony of Jesus” may be a subjective genitive, “the testimony that Jesus gives in these prophetic visions,” 1:9 is certainly an objective genitive, with John in prison due to his testimony to Jesus. Although some interpret the phrase here as holding to the testimony they had received from Jesus (so Morris 1987: 106; Mounce 1998: 147), this verse more likely follows 1:9, “the testimony they maintained” for Jesus. The imperfect εἶχον (*eichon*, were maintaining) dramatizes the past witness of the saints as it progressed. In 12:17 “the word of God” is also interpreted in this direction: “those who obey God’s commandments and hold to the testimony of Jesus” (also 14:12, “who keep the commandments of God”). The phrase in 6:9 is similar to 12:17 and 14:12; the saints were martyred for their obedience to God and for their testimony to Jesus. Throughout the persecution and suffering in the book, the church is presented as a witnessing church. They do not flee for their lives or compromise the gospel in order to avoid persecution but boldly maintain their witness in the desperate situation.

It is a heavenly sacrifice, and the cry for vengeance in 6:10 is made in the very presence of God. The martyred saints ἔκραξαν ὡνῇ μεγάλῃ (*ekraxan phōnē megalē*, cried out with a loud voice), an emphatic phrase for a loud cry used often of angels carrying out the will of God (7:2; 10:3; 14:15; 18:2; 19:17) or of the martyred saints crying out for vengeance (here) or praising God for his salvation (7:10). Here this is obviously the anguished cry of a soul in extremis, similar to the blood of Abel that “cried out” from the ground (Gen. 4:10). The cry begins with a reverential address and then turns into a cry for justice, following the pattern of imprecatory prayers in the OT, with a form like Ps. 6:3; 74:10; 79:5; 80:4.

Some (R. Charles 1920: 1.175; Kiddle 1940: 119) believe that the vindictiveness shown here is problematic and contrasts with the prayers for forgiveness on the part of both Jesus on the cross (Luke 23:34) and Stephen when he was martyred (Acts 7:60). Like the imprecatory prayers of David, however, this cry does not constitute an ethical low in the book but rather a call for divine justice. As Fee and Stuart (1993: 203) note, such prayers are in keeping with the covenant curses of Deut. 28:53–57 and 32:35. This is also in keeping with Rom. 12:19, which quotes Deut. 32:35, “‘It is mine to avenge; I will repay,’ says the Lord”; and Luke 18:7–8, “‘Will not God bring about justice for his

chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night?” Caird (1966: 84–85) points out that this is a cry not for personal revenge but for public justice. They stand before the righteous judge presenting their case for judgment against their persecutors, much like Jesus, who “entrusted himself to the one who judges justly” (1 Pet. 2:23). In other words, this is not a low point for ethics but a high point for divine justice and for the centrality of the sovereignty of God in the life (and death) of the saints.

The prayer begins in an unusual fashion, with ἕως πότε (*heōs pote*, how long) expressing at the outset the anguished plea for justice, a question often addressed to God by a suffering people in the Psalms and Prophets (Ps. 79:5; 89:46; 90:13; Isa. 6:11; Hab. 1:2; Zech. 1:12; Dan. 12:6) as well as in intertestamental literature (1 Enoch 47.2, 4; 99.3; 104.3; 2 Esdr. [4 Ezra] 4:3–5; see Klassen 1966: 303–4). This then is followed by an affirmation of the majesty of God, ὁ δεσπότης ὁ ἅγιος καὶ ἀληθινός (*ho despotēs ho hagios kai alēthinos*, master, holy and true). The title is not the normal term for the lordship of God but is a strong term referring to the absolute authority and power of God (or Christ, if these titles refer back to Christ as “holy and true” in 1:5; 3:14; cf. Heil 1993: 226). ΔΕΣΠΟΤΗΣ occurs only here in the book, and elsewhere in the NT it is primarily used of a “master” as owner of slaves (e.g., Titus 2:9; 1 Pet. 2:18). In the LXX the term translates “Lord” nineteen times. In general the term expresses absolute power and authority. In Luke 2:29 Simeon prays to God as a slave to his master, and in Acts 4:24 God is addressed as the master of creation. Here God is addressed as the judge who will right a terrible wrong. Note that in all three NT uses of it as a divine title, it occurs in prayer passages. This judge is then described as “holy and true” (cf. “righteous and true” in Rev. 16:7; 19:2) in the same way that Christ is described as “holy and true” in the letter to Philadelphia in 3:7. In both cases the terms refer to one who is set apart from wickedness and “faithful” (see on 3:7) to vindicate his people in their suffering. The question here is not whether God will judge the transgressors but how soon. In light of the character of God affirmed in this ascription of praise, their doom is certain, but the martyrs would like it to be sooner rather than later.

The content of the prayer is brief and begins with οὐ κρίνεις καὶ ἐκδικεῖς τὸ αἷμα ἡμῶν (*ou krineis kai ekdikeis to haima hēmōn*, are you not judging and avenging our blood), alluding to Ps. 79:10, “avenge the outpoured blood of your servants.” With the present tenses it poses the question, How long are you going to refrain from judging and avenging? The two verbs are very specific. First, the martyrs are asking for judgment against those who have slain them. In Revelation κρίνω occurs nine times, and the two cognate nouns (judge, judgment) occur seven times. This verb functions as a prelude to the rest of the book as God pours out his judgment on “those who dwell on the earth”—first in the seals, trumpets, and bowls (chaps. 6–16), and then in the final events of the eschaton (chaps. 17–20). As discussed in 3:10, “earth-dwellers” is used thirteen times in the book (three of them variations of the basic phrase used here) as the primary phrase for unbelievers. It is similar to κόσμος (*kosmos*, world) in John, which also refers to the inhabitants of the world as depraved in sin and in utter rebellion against God. This plea is specifically answered in 18:20, “God has judged her for the way she treated you,” and implicitly answered in the judgment of 6:15–17. In other words, as we will see in 8:3–5, one of the reasons for God’s pouring out his judgment is his response to the prayers of the saints here (see also 6:15–17; 15:3; 16:5–7; 18:6, 20, 24; 19:2).

The second verb, ἐκδικεῖς, is more explicitly associated with the earth-dwellers (with the cognate ἐκ meaning “take vengeance on” them).^[22] This verb is found here and in 19:2, “He has avenged on her [the great prostitute] the blood of his servants.” As in the case of God’s

“judgment,” the rest of the book also details the “vengeance” God will exact on the persecutors of his people. This is especially seen in 16:5–7, justifying the turning of the oceans and inland waters to blood in the second and third bowls: “they shed the blood of your saints and prophets, and you have given them blood to drink, as they deserve.” The final vindication comes in two stages: in 20:4–6 the martyred reign on thrones over the earth in the “millennium,” and at the great white throne judgment of 20:11–14 the unsaved are judged “according to their deeds.”

God responds in two ways in 6:11. First, he gives “each of”^[23] the martyrs (another divine passive ἑδόθη [*edothē*, it was given; see on 6:2, 4, 8] indicating the sovereign will of God) στολή λευκή (*stolē leukē*, a white robe). The “white robe” occurs five times in the book (6:11; 7:9, 13, 14; cf. 22:14) and refers to the long robe of rank similar to the “robe down to his feet” worn by Christ in 1:13, the “white” garments promised to the “worthy” faithful in Sardis in 3:4–5, and the “white” garments of the twenty-four elders in 4:4. This robe indicated high social status in the first century. Jesus used it as an example of the scribes who like to “walk around in long robes” (Mark 12:38), and the angel at the resurrection was wearing the same “white robe” (Mark 16:5). In addition, the wearing of such robes was stressed often in Jewish apocalyptic (1 Enoch 62.16; 2 Enoch 22.8; Asc. Isa. 4.16; 2 Esdr. [4 Ezra] 2:39–44) as a sign of the glory of heavenly reward.

Several (R. Charles, Lohmeyer, Caird) interpret this in the light of extrabiblical evidence as meaning the martyrs will be given their glorified bodies early, while the rest of the departed saints will not receive theirs until after final judgment. However, this is reading too much into this brief sign. More likely, it indicates more generally vindication and reward for their faithfulness. The color “white” could refer to purity and holiness or perhaps also their victory (at a Roman triumph the conquering general would wear such a white robe). However, purity and glory are the primary thrusts. In the parallel passage of 7:9, 13–14 the great multitude in heaven are wearing “white robes” because they “washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.” As Roloff (1993: 90) says, “The white robe is a symbol for the salvation granted to the faithful on the basis of Christ’s saving act and, for their communion with God, to be preserved in faithful obedience. . . . White is the color of end-time joy, but also of immaculate purity.” Therefore the church as the bride of Christ will be given “fine linen, bright and clean,” which “stands for the righteous deeds of the saints” (19:8).

The martyrs are then called to have the same patience that characterized their life of perseverance on earth (1:9; 2:2–3, 19; 3:10; 13:10; 14:12). God tells them^[24] ἵνα ἀναπαύσονται ἔτι χρόνον μικρόν (*hina anapausontai eti chronon mikron*, that they should wait for a short time yet).^[25] The imminence of the eschaton is strongly emphasized in “a little longer,” and as Schüssler Fiorenza (1985: 49) states, “all the visions and images of Rev[elation] are determined by such an imminent expectation” (cf. 10:6; 11:18; 12:12; 14:6; 20:3; 22:10). Throughout the book God is seen in process of bringing the world to an end in his own time yet promising that this time will be short. Satan “knows his time is short” (12:12), and the “delay” is over (10:6).^[26] There is probably also double meaning in ἀναπαύσονται, which means not only “wait” but also “rest.” This verse parallels 14:8, in which the martyred saints are told they will “rest from their labor” in heaven. With the “white robe” of glory, this is a promise that they will “rest” in the glory of heaven as they “await” the consummation of God’s victory on their behalf.

Finally, they are told to wait ἕως πληρωθῶσιν (*heōs plērōthōsin*, until [the number] is complete) of those yet to be martyred. This is a concept strange to most today, but it was a common emphasis in apocalyptic writings to say that God in his sovereignty had established a certain number of martyrs who were yet to be killed before the final judgment. Bauckham (1993b: 48–56)

discusses this in light of intertestamental parallels, particularly 1 Enoch 47.1–4 (“And the hearts of the holy ones were full of joy that the number of righteousness had been reached”), 2 Esdr. (4 Ezra) 4:35–37 (“When the number . . . is completed, for he has weighed the age in the balance, and measured the times by measure, and numbered the times by number; and he will not move or arouse them until that measure is fulfilled”), and 2 Bar. 23.4–5a (“No creature will live again unless the number that has been appointed is completed”). These other texts had also asked “how long” before God’s final intervention was to occur, and each responds that the “number” appointed by God must be complete. While there are slight differences with regard to who constitutes that number (Revelation and 1 Enoch—martyrs; 2 Esdras [4 Ezra]—the righteous dead; 2 Baruch—all those born into this world), the idea of a number God had ordained is common to all. In short, the emphasis is on divine sovereignty. God knows each one who is to be martyred and will vindicate them all at the proper time, which will soon come. The rest of chapter 6 shows just how soon that will be. The sixth seal in 6:12–14 gives us the storm theophany that is the immediate forerunner of the eschaton, and 6:15–17 describes the terror of the persecutors as they face the wrath of God.

At the same time, the beleaguered saints are being told that the end of the killing is not yet finished. Only one martyr, Antipas, is named in the book (2:13), but both John the Baptist (Mark 6:14–29) and James the brother of John (Acts 12:1–2) were beheaded, as was Paul under Nero. Josephus tells of the stoning of James the Lord’s brother about A.D. 65 (*Ant.* 20.9.1 §200), and Peter was also martyred (the tradition that he was crucified upside down cannot be proven) under Nero. While recent studies have shown that the popularly held notion of thousands of martyrs in the first hundred years of the church is a gross exaggeration, there were many (see the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, written in the mid-second century). Tacitus (*Annals* 15.44) tells of hundreds of Christians fed to animals, crucified, and burned alive in the Neronian persecution. Here Christ is telling the believers that this persecution will continue until the appointed time.

The saints soon to be martyred are described as καὶ οἱ σύνδουλοι αὐτῶν καὶ οἱ ἀδελφοὶ αὐτῶν (*kai hois syndouloi autōn kai hoi adelphoi autōn*, both their fellow slaves and their brothers). It is unlikely that these are two separate groups,^[27] and the second καί is probably exegetical, meaning “fellow slaves, namely their brothers.” The two descriptions of the future martyrs detail their vertical and horizontal relationships. First, they are God’s slaves along with the martyred saints, and second, they are their brothers and sisters in the faith. Their God-determined lot (see also 1 Pet. 1:6, which says the saints should “rejoice, though now for a short time *if necessary* [meaning ‘if God deems it necessary’] you may suffer in all kinds of trials”) will be a “fellowship in suffering” (the σύν compound; see Phil. 3:10). The idea of a δοῦλος is particularly significant here and is closely connected to “the slaves of our God” who are to be “sealed” in 7:3. The word group appears 182 times in the NT and never means what we call a “servant.” As Tuentje (*NIDNTT* 3:593) says, the emphasis lies “on the service being that of a slave, i.e. on a repressive or at least dependent form of service under the complete control of a superior.” It is used metaphorically by Paul and here by John to stress the absolute dependence and service of believers toward God, who owns them as their master.

iii. Sixth Seal—the Shaking of the Heavens (6:12–17)

(1) Cosmic Signs (6:12–14)

God’s response to the “how long” of the martyrs is both immediate and final. The imminent end of all history is pictured first in the traditional shaking of the heavens^[28] that so often in Scripture

initiates the day of the Lord. Commentators have long struggled with the meaning of this seal, for throughout apocalyptic writings such a scene presages the final end of history, while here more is yet to come. Thus some (R. Charles, Lohmeyer, Krodel) see this as a cosmic herald of future events with John postponing the actual eschaton while he adds more material. However, there is a much simpler answer: the cyclical organization of the seals, trumpets, and bowls, with the second and third cycle repeating and elaborating the meaning of this first cycle. Thus we are at the end of human history (see the arguments in Beale 1999: 398), and these cosmic signs herald the return of Christ. This shaking of the heavens is repeated at the seventh trumpet (11:13, 19) and the seventh bowl (16:18–21), and in each case the emphasis is on God coming in judgment (in answer to the prayers of the martyrs for justice).

The passage begins with the characteristic *καὶ εἶδον* (*kai eidon*, and I saw), used also in 6:2, 5, 8. This is the only place, however, that it begins the opening of one of the seals; elsewhere it came within a section that highlights a further aspect. Again, it is Christ who “opens the sixth seal.” Immediately following the breaking of the seal, the terrible storm begins. Beale (1999: 396–97) points to a catena of OT texts behind the cosmic signs here (Isa. 13:10–13; 24:1–6, 19–23; 34:4; Ezek. 32:6–8; Joel 2:10, 30–31; 3:15–16), with Isa. 34:4 predominant: “And all the powers of the heavens will melt, and the heaven will be rolled up like a scroll; and all the stars will fall . . . as leaves fall from a fig tree.” The *σεισμός μέγας* (*seismos megas*, great earthquake) occurs seven times in Revelation (6:12; 8:5; 11:13 [twice], 19; 16:18 [twice]), and four of them also employ *μέγας* (6:12; 11:13; 16:18 [twice]). All the passages except 8:5 occur in the storm theophany sections named above. As Bauckham (1993b: 199–209) shows, the eschatological earthquake is a key element of ancient apocalyptic. In the OT it is a harbinger of God coming in judgment against his enemies (Judg. 5:4–5; Joel 2:10; Ps. 78:7–8), and the Sinai earthquake becomes the model for the holiness of God evident throughout the exodus (Ps. 68:8; 77:17–18; Hab. 3). It then becomes an integral part of the day of Yahweh (Joel 2:1–2; Mic. 1:3–4; Nah. 1:3–6; Zech. 14:4–5) and becomes a cosmic or universal quake that shakes the heavens and the earth (Isa. 24:18–23; Joel 2:10).

Intertestamental apocalypses borrow most of these themes, especially the eschaton as a new Sinai deliverance (1 Enoch 1.3–9; T. Moses 10.1–7) and the shaking of the cosmos as the initiator of the final eschatological events (1 Enoch 83.3–5; 2 Esdr. [4 Ezra] 6:11–16). In the Synoptic apocalyptic discourse, the shaking of the heavens occurs at the return of Christ (Mark 13:24–27 par.). In Revelation both aspects are found, the Sinai imagery enriching the centrality of the shaking of the cosmos as God ends earthly history, resulting in the final, eternal deliverance of his people.

Next, the sun turns black and the moon blood red. The effects of the eschaton on the heavenly bodies is seen also in the fourth of the trumpets and bowls, as divine judgment is poured out on the earth-dwellers via the sun, moon, and stars (8:12; 16:8–9). Here the darkening of the sun and moon is closest to the fourth trumpet (8:12). The sun becomes *μέλας ὡς σάκκος τρίχινος* (*melas hōs sakkos trichinos*, black as a sackcloth of goat’s hair). This was a coarse coat made of black goat’s hair and usually worn in time of mourning. The theme of mourning is natural and prepares for the picture of mortal terror in 6:15–17. This is the day of God’s wrath (6:17), and the world will mourn its loss. The picture continues with the picture of the moon becoming *ὡς αἷμα* (*hōs haima*, like blood), meaning “red like blood,” a further image of terrible judgment. In Joel 2:31 (quoted by Peter in Acts 2:17–21), “The sun will be turned to darkness and the moon to blood before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the LORD.” The darkening of the sun is frequent in the OT as a sign of judgment (Exod. 10:22; Isa. 13:10; Ezek. 32:7–8), and the turning of the moon bloodred deepens the

image. A terrible judgment is about to fall on the earth-dwellers.

Following this, “the stars of heaven” fall to earth (6:13). Here we have another major apocalyptic image for the end of history. The background is a huge meteor shower, but the image is far more terrifying.^[29] This alludes to Isa. 34:4, “All the stars of heaven will be dissolved and the sky rolled up like a scroll; all the starry host will fall like withered leaves from the vine, like shriveled figs from the fig tree.” Isaiah’s second metaphor for the falling stars is intensified here, “like late figs^[30] drop from a tree when shaken by a strong wind.” In Isaiah it was judgment on the nations, while here it is the final judgment. Note also the connection with the earthquake above, for John uses *σειομένη* (*seïomenē*, shaken), the verb cognate of “earthquake” in 6:12. This metaphor also appears in Jesus’ eschatological discourse in Mark 13:25 and refers to the shaking of the cosmos at the second coming. The only other place in this book the stars fall is in the third trumpet (8:10–11), when a “great star” named “Wormwood” (a bitter plant signifying sorrow) falls onto the inland waters, turning them poisonous. In the same way, this image here indicates the great Judge is coming.

Further, we see “heaven” itself *ἀπεχωρίσθη ὡς βιβλίον ἐλισσόμενον* (*apechōristhē hōs biblion elissomenon*, split apart like a rolled-up scroll) in 6:14. There can be no better image for the end of the world as we know it. It also comes from Isa. 34:4, and Mark 13:25 (par. in Matt. 24:29), “the stars will fall from the sky, and the heavens will be shaken.” The idea of heaven “receding like a scroll” pictures the universe like a massive scroll that is unrolled; thus at the end of this world the scroll will be released and will roll back up upon itself. In that sense the sky will “split apart” or “recede.”^[31] At Jesus’ baptism the heavens were “split apart” (Mark 1:10 par.), also an apocalyptic symbol for the end of the age, and here the heavens will be “rolled up.” Jesus’ first coming began the coming of the kingdom and the end times; this act of God will culminate and finalize the end times.

The final apocalyptic event is the removal of the mountains and islands. This image would be very powerful due to the place of mountains in the religious life of the people (e.g., Mount Olympus, the “home of the gods”) and the vast number of islands in Mediterranean life. The question is whether *ἐκινήθησαν* (*ekinēthēsan*) means “moved” or “removed” from their place. Either is possible, for the term is used in Matt. 23:4 for the scribes who “are not willing to lift a finger to *move*” the heavy burdens they put on people, and in Rev. 2:5 for the warning that Christ would “*remove* the lampstand [i.e., the Ephesian church] from its place.” It could be “moved” by the intensity of the great earthquake of 6:12, but in light of the parallel in 16:20 (“Every island fled away and the mountains could not be found”) it is likely that here it means “removed.” The picture is incredible and terribly frightening. I remember teaching this book in Hawaii a few years ago and seeing everyone’s eyes widen as we got to this part. As preparation for the destruction of the cosmos (2 Pet. 3:10), the shaking of the heavens will commence with the disappearance of every mountain and island.^[32] Such phenomena belong at the end of history, when the heavenly Judge appears in wrath, and that is exactly the theme of the next section.

(2) Terror of Earth-Dwellers (6:15–17)

It is difficult to imagine a more terrifying series of cosmic events than the six-part shaking of the heavens in 6:12–14. Thus the terror of the earth-dwellers is completely understandable, especially since they would realize that the meaning of those events is that judgment day has indeed arrived. Here we have the response of God to the imprecatory prayers of 6:9–11. God is now about to judge their enemies and “avenge their blood.” Therefore, every facet of society quakes in fear.

The sevenfold list of people groups in 6:15 is quite similar to the list of those in 19:18 whose flesh the carrion birds are invited to eat after the battle of Armageddon. Therefore, there is probably a connection between these two events. The judgment envisaged here will take place in 19:17–18, 21. The list here (and especially in 19:18) alludes to the list in Ezek. 38:2–6, which prophesied the destruction of Gog and Magog. That imagery is apt here, foretelling the destruction of the earth-dwellers who have “invaded” and plundered the people of God. The list begins with οἱ βασιλεῖς τῆς γῆς (*hoi basileis tēs gēs*, the kings of the earth), the basic term for the vassal kings who served under the Roman emperor (1:5; 6:15; 17:2, 18; 18:3, 9; 19:19; 21:24). As in Ps. 2:2, these are the earthly rulers who stand against God and his people; in Rev. 17:12–13, they surrender their power and authority to the beast. The second group, οἱ μεγιστᾶνες (*hoi megistanes*, the noblemen), refers to the officials of the court who perform the king’s duties and run the government. The term refers also to the “merchants of the earth” in 18:23. The third group, οἱ χιλιάρχοι (*hoi chiliarchoi*, the generals), are the military tribunes who controlled a thousand men (ten “centuries,” the basic unit of the army). The fourth group, οἱ πλούσιοι (*hoi plousioi*, the wealthy), refers to those wealthy families who, even more than Caesar, ran the Roman Empire. As in many societies, it was the wealthy few who actually determined the direction of the nation. Fifth, οἱ ἰσχυροί (*hoi ischyroi*, the powerful) are probably not a separate category but sum up the first four. It is this small group of influential people who actually run a nation and tell the rest of the people what to do. The last two groups, πᾶς δοῦλος καὶ ἐλεύθερος (*pas doulos kai eleutheros*, every slave and freeman), describe the predominant social strata of the ancient world. Together these made up the lower classes of society, a group that many of the apostles belonged to socially. These are the people who will make up the army of the beast in chapters 16 and 19, and the connection is obvious. At the end of history, everyone who has stood against God will unite first in rebellion and then in destruction as the divine warrior goes to war against them.

All of these will also be united in their fear. Terror is a great equalizer, and all social distinctions drop away in light of the shaking of the heavens and the arrival of the terrible judgment of God. Two things demonstrate the totality of their terror. First, they “hid themselves in the caves and in the rocks of the mountains.” The picture of hiding in caves from an irresistible force is frequent in the OT. Lot and his daughters lived in a cave in fear after the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen. 19:30); five Amorite kings hid in a cave after Joshua had destroyed their armies (Josh. 10:16); and David hid in a cave from the wrath of Saul (1 Sam. 22:1). In 1 Sam. 13:6 the armies of Israel hid in caves and rocks from the Philistines. In particular, this passage probably alludes to Isa. 2:10, 19, 21, which describe the effects of the day of the Lord. Isaiah 2:10 commands Judah to “go into the rocks, hide in the ground,” while verses 19 and 21 predict that “men will flee to caves in the rocks and to holes in the grounds” due to “dread of the LORD.” This results from the rebellion and sin of Judah (chap. 1) resulting in God’s judgment upon the nation in chapters 2–4. Therefore, this first reaction is a natural result of the desire to flee from the wrath of God. At the same time, it is ironic, for Rev. 6:14 told us that at the “great earthquake,” “every mountain” was “removed from its place.” Therefore, these people are hiding in what is soon to disappear and leave them face to face with God.

Second, they are so filled with terror that they cry out to the mountains and rocks in which they are hiding, Πέσετε ἐπ’ ἡμᾶς (*pesete eph’ hēmas*, fall on us).^[33] In their first reaction, they hid among the caves and rocks. Now they want those caves and rocks to fall on them. These people are so filled with irrational terror that they plead for an avalanche to bury them rather than face God and the Lamb. There are not many times in history people have begged to be smothered in an

avalanche. This is an allusion to Hos. 10:8, which describes the destruction of Israel's idolatrous high places and altars and then predicts that Israel will "say to the mountains, 'Cover us!' and to the hills, 'Fall on us!'" Both in Hosea and here the enemies of God wish to perish in order to escape the divine wrath. This plea is also filled with irony, for death will not keep them from the judgment seat of God (Rev. 20:11–14). In short, their terror is so great that they will try anything to escape.

They want the rocks to "fall on us" so as to "hide us from the face of the one who sits upon the throne." In the OT the "face of God" always referred to his relationship with humanity, either turning to humans in mercy (Num. 6:25–26; Ps. 4:6; 80:3) or turning from them in anger (Lev. 17:10; Ps. 13:1; 104:29; so Tiedtke, *NIDNTT* 1:585). In the NT the judgment aspect is predominant (one exception: angels "see the face" of God "in heaven," Matt. 18:10), as in 2 Thess. 1:9 ("They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the face of the Lord") and 1 Pet. 3:12 ("the face of the Lord is against those who do evil"). In Revelation there is a contrast between 20:11 ("earth and sky fled from his face") and 22:4 ("they will see his face and his name will be on their foreheads"). The saints will dwell in his presence and participate in his glory, but the old order, not just the earth-dwellers but the material creation that has felt the effects of human sin (see Rom. 8:19–21; 2 Pet. 3:10), must flee his presence. As in Rev. 4:2, 3, 9, 10; 5:1, 7, 13, God is described as "the one who sits on the throne." The title describes him as both majestic and sovereign over his creation. It is used here undoubtedly to recall the themes of the "great throne room vision" of chapters 4 and 5 and to apply them to the judgment theme of chapter 6. The throne is also a bema, and the theme points forward to the final judgment scene of 20:11–14, where again we see "the throne and one who sits on it" (20:11).

The most startling aspect of this passage is the second judge. The people of this world wish to hide not only from "the one who sits on the throne" but also ἀπὸ τῆς ὀργῆς τοῦ ἀρνίου (*apo tēs orgēs tou arniou*, from the wrath of the Lamb). The paradox is striking: the sacrificial lamb has become the judge of all, and the Lamb is now filled with wrath. In 5:6 the Lamb became the conquering ram because he was "slain." In 6:1–2 the Lamb, because he was "worthy" (5:2–5, 9, 12), opens each of the seals. Now he becomes not only conqueror (5:5) but judge, and his righteous "wrath" is kindled. This is another powerful image, as the meek Lamb becomes the wrathful Lamb. The term ὀργή is used of Jesus only once in his ministry (Mark 3:5), but the cleansing of the temple (Mark 11:15–18 par.) certainly exemplified it. In John Jesus is called "judge" often (5:22, 30; 8:15–16; 9:39), and this theme parallels the Lamb's actions in Revelation. This is the first of six times (twice in 6:16–17) that ὀργή occurs in the book, and it is obviously a major theme. One of the purposes of the seals, trumpets, and bowls is to display the wrath of the righteous God to a world that has rejected him (16:1). The judgment on the earth-dwellers is called "the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God" in 19:15. This summarizes the messages of 14:10, in which the sinners drink "the wine of God's fury . . . poured full strength into the cup of his wrath," and of 16:19, in which God gives Babylon "the cup filled with the wine of the fury of his wrath." This is God's response to a world consumed with sin. As 11:18 says (building on Ps. 2:1), "The nations were angry, and your wrath has come." John elsewhere uses the synonym θυμός (*thymos*, anger; used alongside ὀργή in 14:10; 16:19; 19:15), which intensifies this emphasis, for instance in the contrast between the "wrath" of the dragon, the result of frustration because "he knows his time is short" (12:12), and the "great winepress of God's wrath" (14:19; both passages using θυμός) addressed to those who have followed the dragon. The anger of the nations (11:18) and of the dragon is the result of evil, and the anger of God and the Lamb is righteous and the result of holiness or opposition to evil.

This theme sums up a major motif throughout Scripture. In the OT God's wrath is the obverse of

his covenant love. As Hahn (*NIDNTT* 1:109) aptly puts it, “Within the framework of covenant theology the wrath of God can be seen as an expression of rejected and wounded love. . . . He passes judgment on the wicked and on whole nations.” Psalm 2 is a good example, beginning with “Why do the nations conspire and the people plot in vain?” (2:1) and then moving to “Then he rebukes them in his anger and terrifies them in his wrath” (2:5, with both verses used in Rev. 11:18a). We must understand that God’s anger is directed at sin. Many scholars have reacted to the concept of “wrath” in the Book of Revelation as if it contradicted divine love and the sacrificial death of the Lamb of God (e.g., R. Charles 1920: 1.182–83; Caird 1966: 92). However, this is due to their disregarding the terrible nature of sin. When a people transgress the laws of God, they are in effect denying the covenant and bringing the wrath of God on themselves. The day of Yahweh is pictured as a “day of wrath” (Ezek. 7:19; Zeph. 2:2–3), as the nations and the unrepentant people of Israel feel the burning anger of God directed against them in terrible destruction. The NT continues this theme. John the Baptist preached the necessity of repentance in light of coming wrath (Matt. 3:7–8), and Jesus warned of rejecting the Son and experiencing the wrath of God (John 3:36). It is Paul who develops a theology of wrath, centering first on God’s wrath as a present reality. Due to sin, people are “by nature objects of wrath” (Eph. 2:3), and therefore “the wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of those who suppress the truth by their wickedness” (Rom. 1:18). The future judgment (Col. 3:6; cf. Rom. 2:5, 8; 5:9) is a finalization of that wrath that has already begun to come “on those who are disobedient” (Eph. 5:6).

The reason for this terror (ὅτι, *hoti*, because) is the arrival of “the great day of their wrath” in 6:17. As already stated above, the “great day of wrath” recapitulates the “day of the LORD” passages of the OT. Joel spoke of it as “the great and dreadful day of the LORD” (Joel 2:11, 31), and Malachi says that “great and dreadful day” will “burn like a furnace” (Mal. 4:1, 5). A more extensive description is found in Zeph. 1:14–16: “a day of distress and anguish, a day of trouble and ruin, a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and blackness, a day of trumpet and battle cry.” There are also several allusions to the “day of Yahweh” in the NT (1 Cor. 1:8; 5:5; Phil. 1:6, 10; 2:16; 1 Thess. 5:2; 2 Pet. 3:10). Here in 6:16–17 we are finally at the fulfillment of all the “day of Yahweh” prophecies in the Bible. The use of the aorist ἤλθεν (*ēlthen*, has come) should be understood like the parallel in Luke 11:20, “If I drive out demons by the finger of God, then the kingdom of God has come” (the aorist there also points to an event that has already occurred). The key is to realize the cyclical nature of the seals, trumpets, and bowls. We are at the eschaton here in 6:16–17, and the day of the Lord has been inaugurated for real as the final judgment and the end of history.

With this final appearance in history of divine wrath, the natural question is, Who is able to stand? This appears frequently in the OT, such as Mal. 3:2 (“Who can stand when he appears?”); Joel 2:11 (“Who can endure it?”); or Nah. 1:6 (“Who can withstand his indignation?”). When God appears in wrath, none of his enemies will stand. There are several images in this: (1) God as the conquering king (called “the Almighty” nine times in this book) will force all his opponents to bow the knee. (2) When his judgment is poured out, they will not be able to withstand it. (3) In short, his omnipotence will prevail, and the earth-dwellers will be helpless.

Summary and Contextualization

The seals lead into the key theme of the book, the opening of the scroll that contains the divine plan for ending the present world order that is under the power of sin. The sovereignty and majesty of God and the Lamb, the theme of chapters 4–5, continues to dominate here, for the

Lamb superintends each of the first four seals, and it is God who authorizes the activities of the horsemen (6:2, 4, 8). The first four summarize the effects of total depravity, as the apocalyptic horsemen unleash the deepest sins of humankind: lust for conquest, civil war, famine, and pestilence/death. They are also “plagues” sent by God as judgment on humankind for their intractable sin. Within this there is a very important message for hearers today—realize the effects of sin! The tendency of all of us, being human, is to rationalize away our cherished sins. We must realize what sin actually produces—death and destruction. Even the so-called little sins eat away at the fiber of our being. Also, war is the product of our human self-centeredness. Perhaps never before have there been so many small wars over ethnic and racial pride. Tribal hatred exists in every nation and territory on earth. It takes the form of racism, national pride, and ethnic hatred, but its tentacles stem from a sinful core in the final analysis.

The fifth seal addresses one of the core issues of the Gospels: *imitatio Christi*. As in Mark 8:34, believers must be willing to “take up their cross” and die for Christ if need be. It is clear in the Apocalypse that martyrdom is a major issue. In the early church John had seen followers killed (Antipas in 2:13, the many under Nero’s persecution) and expected many more to die for “the word of God and the testimony of Jesus” (1:2, 9). The message of this book is that martyrdom is the final victory over Satan and a great privilege in sharing the “messianic woes” of Jesus. Those who die will, like the “slain Lamb,” be “under the altar” as sacrifices to God. Their triumph is symbolized in the white robes given them, and the promise is of vindication for their suffering. Again, God is in control and has determined exactly “how long” it will be before the final martyr is killed. Then their blood will be “avenged.” But their final victory is assured.

The sixth bowl inaugurates the fulfillment of God’s promise to “avenge their blood.” It is both judgment on the earth-dwellers and vindication for the saints. The “shaking of the heavens” was an apocalyptic sign for the coming of the day of the Lord, and this signifies that the end of world history has arrived (cf. Mark 13:24–25 par.). This is one reason why the interlude of chapter 7 occurs after the sixth seal; the eschaton has arrived, so it is time to look at other aspects of this final period in human history. The abject terror of the very ones who have inflicted such suffering on the people of God, namely the rulers of this world and their followers (6:15–17), is proleptic of the final vindication promised in 6:11. The wrath of God and the Lamb has come down on the earth-dwellers for their rebellion against God and their cruelty to his people. The message is clear: God will vindicate us for all that we sacrifice and suffer for his sake. But the question remains: are we willing to persevere and be faithful to him in the midst of terrible opposition? That is one of the primary issues in this book.

Additional Notes

6:1. Ἐρχου: On the basis of a textual variant, Ἐρχου καὶ ἴδε, some scholars (e.g., Walvoord 1966: 125) believe that the summons of the living creature is to John to “come and see” the rider on the white horse. While there is some good manuscript evidence for this variant (046², many minuscules, its^g syr^{ph}, ^h et al., with TR 2096 249 reading βλέπε), the preferred reading ἔρχου also has excellent manuscript evidence (A C P 1 1006 1611 1854 2053 vg et al.). It is likely that copyists simply misunderstood the command as addressed to John, for it is clear in all the other seals that the commands are addressed to the horsemen.

6:2. καὶ εἶδον: While this reading has very good support (² [A C ἴδον] P 1 1006 et al.), it is missing from 046 and several minuscules, probably because many of them add καὶ ἴδε and so omit καὶ εἶδον as superfluous (see Metzger 1994: 667–68).

6:4. ἐκ τῆς γῆς: In some manuscripts, ἐκ is replaced by ἀπό (1 1828 2053 TR) or ἐπὶ (2344). However, ἐκ has much better support (² * C P 046 1006 et al.), and the other readings were probably stylistic changes.

6:8. Ἐπάνω αὐτοῦ: This reading is found in Σ A 046 and most minuscules, but Ἐπάνω without αὐτοῦ is found in C P 1 1611 et al. The former reading has the better manuscript evidence, however, and is probably correct. Most likely, αὐτοῦ was accidentally omitted in later manuscripts. The later reading Ἐπ’ αὐτοῦ (1854 and several Old Latin and Vulgate manuscripts) is most likely an assimilation to the same phrase in verses 2, 4, 5.

6:10. ἐκ τῶν κατοικούντων ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς: In the Book of Revelation “earth-dwellers” constantly refers to those who are antithetical to God and his people. Their names are not written in the Lamb’s book of life (13:8; 17:8), meaning they have no place in God’s eternal kingdom. In addition, they are headed for divine judgment (8:13) because they hate the people of God and rejoice over their death, both the blood of the two witnesses (11:10) and the blood of the saints (6:10; 17:2, 6). They are deceived by the dragon (12:9, using the parallel “the whole earth”) and both follow and worship the beast (13:3, 8, 14; 17:8).

6:11. πληρωθῶσιν: There are four different readings of this term. The two indicative readings (πληρώσουσιν and πληρώσονται) have very weak support (a few late [12th to the 16th centuries] minuscules and Arethas, a 10th-century church father). The active subjunctive πληρώσωσιν has much better support, with Σ P 046 1 1006 1854 et al. If this were the reading, John would not be discussing the completion of the number of martyrs but the completion of their life of faithful witness. Of slightly stronger manuscript strength is the preferred reading, πληρωθῶσιν, found in A C 2344 it⁸g,⁶¹ vg et al. This would involve a rare intransitive use of πληρώω, but on this see BAGD 672 §5. Most believe that πληρώσωσιν arose as a transcriptional sight or hearing error.

6:15. See Bauckham (1993b: 29–37) for a detailed discussion of the remarkable use of sevens throughout this book. With such prevalent groupings by sevens in so many disparate places, it is hard to imagine that they are all accidental. Since seven is the number of completeness, it is likely that John here is stressing the complete number of the persecutors of the saints who will face God’s wrath. None will escape.

6:17. αὐτῶν: Several good manuscripts (A P 046, many minuscules, and several church fathers) read the singular αὐτοῦ instead of the plural. This is understandable since only the Lamb is described in 6:16 as having “wrath.” The plural reading also has impressive credentials (Σ C 94 1611 1828 et al.), however, and it is more likely that a later scribe changed the more clumsy plural into a singular to fit the “wrath of the Lamb” than vice versa. Interestingly, Bauckham (1993b: 139) prefers the singular and believes it is another instance (with 11:15 and 22:3, 4) in which God and Christ are seen as a unity by the switch to a singular.

b. First Interlude: Saints on Earth and in Heaven (7:1–17)

Lambrecht (1998: 208) states that this chapter does not belong with chapter 6 but is an interruption or interlude meant to console the persecuted Christians. At the same time, it is closely linked to chapter 6 because the suffering Christians look back on 6:9–11. The interludes have multiple purposes. First, the two that occur between the sixth and seventh seals and trumpets are closely linked to the sixth judgments that precede each. Second, they provide information about the situation regarding the saints (7:1–17) and the conflict (10:1–11:13; 12:1–13:18) surrounding the seals, trumpets, and bowls. Third, they stress even more the sovereign control of God over the whole process. In the case of chapter 7, we must begin with the question ending the sixth seal (6:17), “Who can stand?” This interlude answers that question and contrasts the saints with the sinners. The earth-dwellers, or sinners, will not stand when the judgment of God falls on them, but the heaven-dwellers, or saints, will stand because they bear the “seal” of God. Therefore, they will indeed “stand” in the midst of the judgments poured out on this world. As Beale (1999: 405) points out, the repetition of ἵστημι (*histēmi*, stand) in 6:17 and 7:9 shows that the question “Who is able to stand?” in 6:17 is answered by “the great multitude . . . standing before the throne” in 7:9.

There is a continuous stream of data regarding God’s protection of his faithful followers through this period. The programmatic promise is given to the church of Philadelphia in 3:10, “Because you have kept the teaching about my endurance, I will also keep you from the hour of trial that is about to come upon the whole earth to try those who dwell on the earth.” The sealing of the saints in 7:1–8 details the way this is carried out. It is then developed further in the specific commands sprinkled throughout the trumpets and bowls: 8:13 (“Woe! Woe! Woe to the inhabitants of the earth . . .”); 9:4 (“They were told . . . to harm . . . only those people who did not have the seal of God on their foreheads”); 16:6 (“They have shed the blood of your saints and prophets, and you have given them blood to drink, as they deserve”); and 16:19 (“God remembered Babylon the Great and gave her the cup filled with the wine of the fury of his wrath”). It is quite clear that the seals, trumpets, and bowls are poured out only on the unsaved, and the believers are spared because they have been sealed by God.

At the same time, the sealing of the saints carries on the promise made to the martyrs in 6:9–11, “wait a little longer, until the number of your fellow slaves, that is, your brothers and sisters who are about to be killed, is complete.” This is the obverse of that: there the number of saints are killed by the earth-dwellers, while here the number of saints are protected by God from his judgments. In both, the completeness of the number is stressed, there by the term πληρωθῶσιν (*plērōthōsin*, they were complete) and here by the symbolism of completeness in the 12 x 12 x 1000 as the tribes are sealed (see below). The question arises as to how saints are to be at one and the same time protected and killed. It sounds as if the protection breaks down rather severely. The answer is to realize that the two apply to different aspects of these last days. The saints are protected from the wrath of God but are not protected from the wrath of the beast. They will not suffer from the seals, trumpets, and bowls but will suffer from the persecution of the earth-dwellers. Two sayings of Jesus will put this in perspective: Mark 10:29 (“I tell you the truth, no one who has left home or brothers . . . will fail to receive a hundred times as much in this present age . . . and with them, persecutions”) and Matt. 10:28 (“Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell”). Revelation forces

the reader to realize what really matters, the earthly or the heavenly. God protects the vital part, the soul, but allows intense suffering in this world. A great deal of space in the NT is given over to this problem (e.g., Rom. 5:3–5; 8:12–39; 1 Cor. 4:8–13; 1 Thess. 1:4–7; Heb. 12:4–11; James 1:2–4; 1 Pet. 1:6–7; 3:13–4:19). God’s loving presence is never more real than in times of suffering and persecution. The message of Rev. 7:1–8 reiterates that important truth. Believers have no reason to fear the terrible events of 6:12–17 or the effects of the judgments in chapters 6–16, for they belong to him and are his people. Krodel (1989: 180) notes the deliberate pun on the word “seal.” As the Lamb opens the “seals” of judgment upon the unsaved, God places his “seal” upon the saved. The earth-dwellers are sealed for judgment, and the heaven-dwellers are sealed for salvation.

This leads to the debate over the connection between the saints sealed on earth in 7:1–8 and the multitudes worshiping in heaven in 7:9–17. Are they two distinct groups (Walvoord, Gundry, Glasson, Kraft, Thomas) or one and the same (Beckwith, Beasley-Murray, Sweet, Metzger, Chilton, Roloff, Lohse, Giesen, Beale, Aune, LaVerdiere 1999: 546)? The answer depends on whether the tribes are interpreted literally of Jewish people brought to Christ during this period or symbolically of the church as the new Israel. While this will be discussed in more depth below, a couple of preliminary comments will help. To take this in a literal way is difficult partly because the ten tribes had been lost at the exile, and so the majority of the tribes were not around in John’s time. Also, this would restrict God’s “sealing” to Jews rather than Gentiles, and the atmosphere of the book is that the whole church was involved. Also, in 7:3 those sealed are called “the slaves of God,” and in 6:11 all those to be martyred are called “fellow slaves.” A subissue of this is whether the multitude of 7:9–17 should be restricted to martyrs (Caird, Harrington, Bauckham), extended to all Christians (R. Charles, Lohmeyer, Prigent, Beasley-Murray, Mounce, Aune), or perhaps be seen as the Gentiles gathered into the church (Farrer, Glasson, Kraft, Chilton, Geyser). This is connected to the question as to whether Revelation pictures all the saints being martyred. While that issue is often raised, it must be dismissed. There is no true atmosphere of total martyrdom in the book, so the multitude in 7:9–17 must be regarded as constituting both martyrs and nonmartyrs among the saints. Limiting it to Gentiles is similarly unnecessary; it is clear that the multitudes are inclusive in 7:9–10. Finally, the question must be raised as to whether these constitute believers of all ages (Beale 1999: 416–23; Aune 1998a: 440–45) or just those of this final period of history (so Beasley-Murray 1978: 139–40). This must be answered by identifying the 144,000 in 7:1–8 (all believers or those in this final period) and asking how closely linked verses 1–8 and verses 9–17 are. I would agree with Mounce (1998: 154) that those sealed in verses 1–8 are then part of the multitude in verses 9–17, so that they constitute all believers of every age.

Therefore the purpose of this interlude is to picture the people of God being sealed prior to the outpouring of judgments and then in heaven worshiping God after the number of martyrs has been completed (6:11). In its chronological relationship to the seals of 6:1–8:1, 7:1–8 gives us a flashback to the time just prior to God’s outpouring of judgment, and 7:9–17 takes us forward to the time following these judgments. The saints are sealed as God’s possession and then immediately (in the scene of chap. 7) are in heaven rejoicing in the fruits of their labor for God.

Several scholars (R. Charles, Beasley-Murray, Krodel) believe John is drawing this from an earlier Jewish prophetic source because of the extensive list of the tribes as well as the apocalyptic use of destructive winds (not found elsewhere in this book) and the quite different pictures of the church in 7:1–8 and 7:9–17. However, the idea of the church as new Israel is in keeping with the “synagogue of Satan” passages in 2:9 and 3:9 as well as the “temple in heaven” (composed of the church) imagery and the description of the New Jerusalem as a Holy of Holies (comprising the

whole redeemed church gathered from every nation) in 21:9–27. Also, this is presented as a vision that John “saw” (7:1, 2) and “heard” (7:4); in my opinion that means this was sent by God rather than copied by John from another source.

i. Sealing the Saints (7:1–8)

In the narrative development from the sixth seal (6:12–17) it is clear that the forces of destruction are gathered, and the final destruction of this evil world is imminent. But God is not quite ready to finalize that ultimate annihilation. First, his people must be “sealed” in order to protect them from that conflagration. In one sense this is a flashback to the period preceding the seals (see below). However, the narrative here is interested not in chronology but in themes. Thus, the four winds of destruction are harnessed (7:1–3) so they cannot at this time carry out their terrible task. The angelic forces have been given a more important task: to secure the people of God with a seal on their foreheads, indicating ownership, that they are God’s “slaves” (7:3), and to signify that they are to be protected from the judgments that are soon to follow.

- (1) Holding back winds of destruction (7:1–3)
- (2) Sealing the twelve tribes (7:4–8)

Exegesis and Exposition

¹After this I saw four angels standing at the four corners of the earth, restraining the four winds of the earth so that the wind could not continue to blow on the land or on the sea or on any tree. ²And I saw another angel ascending from the east holding the seal of the living God. And he cried out with a loud voice to the four angels who had been given power to damage the land and the sea, ³saying, “Do not damage the land or the sea or the trees, until we have sealed the slaves of our God on their foreheads.”

⁴And I heard the number of those who were sealed, 144,000 sealed from every tribe of the sons of Israel.

⁵From the tribe of Judah, 12,000 were sealed,

from the tribe of Reuben, 12,000,

from the tribe of Gad, 12,000,

⁶from the tribe of Asher, 12,000,

from the tribe of Naphtali, 12,000,

from the tribe of Manasseh, 12,000,

⁷from the tribe of Simeon, 12,000,

from the tribe of Levi, 12,000,

from the tribe of Issachar, 12,000,

⁸from the tribe of Zebulun, 12,000,

from the tribe of Joseph, 12,000,

from the tribe of Benjamin, 12,000.

(1) Holding Back Winds of Destruction (7:1–3)

“Four angels” stand at “the four corners of the earth” holding back “the four winds of destruction.” The number “four” is one of the primary numbers in the book. The seals, trumpets, and bowls have a 4 + 3 structure, and these numbers are important in the book. The “four angels” are connected to the “four angels” in 9:14 and may allude back to the “four spirits of heaven” in Zech. 6:5 (cf. the “four winds of heaven” in Dan. 7:2; 8:8; 11:4). In 2 Bar. 6.4–5 there are “four angels at the four corners” of Jerusalem holding torches in order to destroy it. The phrase “winds of destruction” draws on a common apocalyptic idea in which Yahweh controls the weather—winds or rain or lightning—and makes it do his bidding. At the exodus, it was the wind that brought the locusts and bore them away (Exod. 10:13, 19) as well as turned the sea into dry land (Exod. 14:21). God soars “on the wings of the wind” (Ps. 18:10). The “four winds” developed in the prophetic period to depict a universal disaster that comes from every direction. In Jer. 49:36 they brought

destruction “from the four quarters of the heavens” to Elam, and in Dan. 7:2ff. they “churned up the sea” and brought the four beasts out of it (see also 8:8; 11:4). In 1 Enoch 76 the winds pass through the twelve portals of heaven, with four containing winds of blessing and eight winds of destruction. As R. Charles (1920: 1.204) and Mounce (1998: 155–56) note, in Jewish thought the winds that blew north-south or east-west were helpful winds and those that blew diagonally were harmful. The closest parallel to our text is probably Zech. 6:5, the same passage behind the four horsemen of Rev. 6:1–8. The “four winds of heaven” there take their place in front of each of the chariot horses and lead them in the four directions of the compass. For this reason several (e.g., Farrer, Caird, Morris, Beasley-Murray, Johnson, Beale) believe that the four winds are identical with the four horsemen, a very real possibility in light of the retrospective look of this scene. This is further evidence that this scene occurs before the four horsemen of 6:1–8, during the days that they were kept back from their destructive mission until the saints could be sealed by God.

The angels stand “at the four corners of the earth,” another ancient idiom for every part of the world (Ezek. 7:2). Some have thought this meant the ancients viewed the world as a square surface, but there are just as many passages in the Bible using a circle as a model (Ps. 19:6; Isa. 40:22). This is simply an idiom and no more. Here we have one difference between this passage and Zech. 6:5, for there the winds were heavenly while here they are “of earth.” This is an earthly disaster that God is about to unleash. The primary emphasis is that these angels ἑστῶτας (*hestōtas*, stand) and κρατοῦντας (*kratountas*, hold back) these four winds of destruction. Both participles stress ongoing action, as the angels “stand” firm and “restrain”^[1] the winds from their destructive purpose until God’s appointed time. The apocalyptic forces of destruction are under sovereign control and can move only when God so designates. It is hard to see why the angel of God is restraining the very forces that were unleashed in 6:1–8. In one sense this action emphasizes God’s sovereignty over the whole process and especially his care for his faithful followers. God will not allow judgment to come upon the earth until his people are “sealed” from those terrible forces. His preeminent concern is for those about to be martyred (6:11).

Interestingly, these winds are not prevented from blowing on people but from blowing on “land or sea or any tree.” However, destructive winds would devastate people by affecting the land and the vegetation. The sirocco, the hot wind off the desert, could literally wilt a flower in seconds. This imagery is used often by OT writers as a metaphor for divine punishment (Jer. 51:36; Hos. 13:15) as well as of the fragility of life (Ps. 103:16; Isa. 40:6–7). Therefore, the wind became a natural metaphor in Jewish apocalyptic for judgment. The Greek is ἵνα μὴ πνέῃ ἄνεμος (*hina mē pneē anemos*, so that the wind might not continue blowing) and with the present subjunctive stresses an ongoing wind, probably with hurricane force. It will destroy not just vegetation but also the oceanic waters. Anyone depending on the sea for trade or traffic (namely, everyone living then in the Mediterranean region) would catch the terrible implications of the added “or on the sea” here. By placing this between “land” and “tree,” it has special emphasis. These winds were prepared to destroy all seagoing commerce and travel, thereby destroying the Roman Empire, since it depended on the sea lanes for its whole way of life. These categories also introduce the use of God’s creation for judgment, a theme that will carry through the trumpets and the bowls, with the first four of each being disasters centering on nature.

The second part of the vision also begins with καὶ εἶδον (*kaieidon*, and I saw), indicating another aspect of the vision (as in 6:2, 8). Now ἄλλον ἄγγελον (*allon angelon*, another angel)^[2] appears, apparently an angel of great authority, for he both commands the other four and bears the seal of God. Interestingly, this phrase occurs nine more times in the book, and in each occurrence it

signifies an angel with great authority. In 8:3 it is the angel with the golden censer; in 10:1–2 the “mighty angel” with the little scroll; in 14:6–7, 8, 9 the three angels who interpret the key events of the tribulation period; in 14:15, 17, 18 the angels who harvest the earth; and in 18:1–2 the angel with “great authority” who proclaims the destruction of Babylon. Thus this is not an incidental appearance but a turning point in the divine plan. This angel comes “from the rising of the sun,” an idiom for “from the east.” The meaning of this is quite debated. Some (Kiddle, Beasley-Murray) take this as a symbol of divine blessing, since the east is the source of light and the place of Paradise (Gen. 2:8; 1 Enoch 32.3–4). Others (Roloff, Sweet) see this as an allusion to Ezek. 43:2, 4, in which God (and the Messiah in Sib. Or. 3.652) enters the temple from the east. Still others see this as more simply the direction of Palestine (Johnson, Mounce, Thomas). Or perhaps this is a parody, since in the Apocalypse evil powers come from the east (16:12) or from the Euphrates to the east (9:14–15) (so Beale 1999: 408). No definite answer is possible, but considering all the data above, the “east” seems to signify the outpouring of God’s kingdom blessings (in contrast to the powers of evil), an appropriate emphasis since one of the greatest blessings is about to be bestowed, the seal of God. In this sense, all the options are part of the picture behind this symbol. There is an interesting contrast in Rev. 16:12, where the kings who will destroy the evil Roman Empire come “from the east,” namely the other side of the Euphrates. In this section, however, it is a positive image, for they will be the hand of God in judgment.

This angel is depicted as ἔχοντα σφραγίδα θεοῦ ζῶντος (*echonta sphragida theou zōntas*, holding the seal of the living God). This is a remarkable image. Most likely it pictures the angel carrying God’s royal signet ring, a ring used by kings, officials, and those in authority to authenticate documents. In the ancient world the seal meant ownership, protection, and privilege. As Fitzer (TDNT 7:942–43) points out, a seal in the ancient world was closely connected to the gods and provided a special power to the one wielding it: “The deity protects, and the same power is ascribed to the image.” A sacrifice was often sealed, guaranteeing its inviolability to the gods. In many Greco-Roman cults (e.g., Cybelle, Attis, and Mithras) the worshipers were sealed to indicate they belonged to the gods. The sealing of the saints here is all this and more. It is both a promise to the faithful overcomers and a warning to the Nicolaitan heretics (2:14–16, 20–23) that they are following the wrong gods. In the OT “seals” are primarily royal (Gen. 41:42; 1 Kings 21:8; Esth. 3:10; Dan. 6:17), used to indicate that the bearer has the king’s authority to make decisions or to authenticate a royal decree. Moyise (1995: 71) argues that the primary background comes from Ezek. 9:4–6, where God required that a mark be placed on the forehead of the faithful to signify that they were his and to protect them from the coming destruction (more on this below). In the intertestamental period legal documents were also sealed, for instance a marriage contract in Tob. 7:14 or a treaty in 2 Esdr. (4 Ezra) 20:1. In Judaism even circumcision could be called “the seal of Abraham in your flesh” (Exod. Rab. 19 [81c]; see Fitzer, TDNT 7:947).^[3]

In the NT the stone at Jesus’ tomb is “sealed” to secure it from supposed grave robbers (i.e., the disciples, Matt. 27:62–66). Also, Paul talks about “sealing this fruit” (Rom. 15:28), namely the collection for the poor in Jerusalem, which Moo (1996: 906–7) takes to mean “an official affirmation of authenticity” in order to “affirm its integrity and insure that it is understood rightly.” Most of the time, σφραγίς is used metaphorically, as in the “seal of the Holy Spirit” in Eph. 1:13–14; 4:30. In 2 Cor. 1:22 Paul says that God has “set his seal on us and given us the Holy Spirit as a deposit.” Here the Holy Spirit is a “sign that they belong to God in a special way and have been stamped with the character of their owner” (Lincoln 1990: 39). Thus in the early church the idea of being sealed is to belong to God and to be under his protection.

Here the “seal of the living God” has the strongest designation in the NT, for the seal itself is identified as belonging to “the living God.” This title is frequent in both OT (Deut. 5:26; Josh. 3:10; Ps. 42:2; Isa. 37:4, 17; Hos. 1:10) and NT (Matt. 16:16; Rom. 9:26; 1 Thess. 1:9; 1 Tim. 3:15). In the OT the primary thrust is the contrast between God and dead idols as well as his activity on behalf of his people. “Only Yahweh is active and alive. Only Yahweh intervenes in the affairs of his people. God’s actions for his people prove his power and demonstrate the nature of his person” (Butler 1983: 46–47). This message is an important part of the meaning here and is certainly intended for those who followed the Nicolaitan heresy and participated in emperor worship; why follow a false god when you have the eternal living God in your midst? The NT continues the OT themes, with the added thrust that it is God who gives life and produces salvation. In Revelation the idea of the “living God” parallels 4:9–10, where the living creatures and then the twenty-four elders worship the God “who lives forever and ever.” In both cases the phrase is intimately connected to the God “who sits on the throne,” in other words to the God who is sovereign for all eternity. The genitive “seal of the living God” is primarily possessive (“God’s seal”), but there may be an aspect of a subjective genitive as well (“the eternal, sovereign God seals his faithful followers”). It is this sovereign God who actively intervenes for his people, as in holding back the winds of destruction until he has sealed them and made them his own.

This angel who carries the seal of God then gives his orders to the other four angels as he ἔκραξεν ἰωνῇ μεγάλῃ (*ekraxen phōnē megalē*, cried out with a loud voice). This is exactly the form used for the martyred souls under the altar in 6:10, and there is a definite connection. His cry is the divine response to their cry. Those “slaves of God” (7:3) who are about to die will first be sealed by the “living God” who owns them and protects them from the judgment soon to be poured out on the persecutors. The juxtaposition of “sealed” with “slave” is significant. The seal indeed is the outward sign of the reality that we are God’s slaves, owned by him. As 1 Cor. 6:19–20 says, “You are not your own; you were bought at a price.”

Here we learn one other fact about the four angels. They ἐδόθη αὐτοῖς ἀδικῆσαι τὴν γῆν καὶ τὴν θάλασσαν (*edothē autois adikēsai tēn gēn kai tēn thalassan*, were given [power] to harm the land and the sea). Ἐδόθη is the same verb used in 6:2, 4, 8 for the sovereign act of God who “gave” the four horsemen “power to take peace from the earth” (6:4). It is used several times in the book to show that God is in control even in desperate situations, and that even the powers of evil take their orders from him. Here God has given power over the land and the sea to these four angels and the winds they control.

The restraint hinted at in 7:1 is made explicit in 7:3 by the divine command, Μὴ ἀδικήσητε (*mē adikēsēte*, [4] do not harm the land or the sea or the trees). There are two repetitions here for emphasis. The verb “harm” looks back to the divinely bestowed power to “damage” the vegetation and the waters. God is truly sovereign and can inflict judgment whenever he determines it necessary. Also, this is the third time the recipient of the judgment is mentioned. All three terms (land, sea, trees) are mentioned in 7:1, 3, and two of them (land and sea) are stressed in 7:2. In this sense John is distinctly pointing to the trumpets and the bowls, where the judgment on the “land and the sea” is carried out. At this time, however, the emphasis is on the restraint. The four angels are to “hold back” the judgment ἄχρι σφραγίσωμεν τοὺς δούλους τοῦ θεοῦ ἡμῶν (*achri sphragisōmen tous doulous tou theou hēmōn*, until we have sealed the slaves [see 11:18 on this term] of our God). In other words, the “seal” is a mark indicating that the person is the property of God. Unlike the Greco-Romans, however, the believers are not the property of “the gods” but of “our God” (stated by angels also in 7:12; 19:1, 5). It is the personal, loving God who puts his seal on the

saints. The switch from the second person (“you are not to harm”) to the first person (“we have placed the seal of our God”) to the third person (“on their foreheads”) is striking. The God who is the personal God of the angels is about to make the faithful believers part of his family (in the Roman world slaves were considered part of the family).

Finally, this seal is to be placed ἐπὶ τῶν μετώπων αὐτῶν (*epitōn metōpōn autōn*, on their foreheads). This is an allusion to Ezek. 9:4–6, part of a remarkable judgment passage on those who committed idolatry in the temple (Ezek. 8–9). In 9:1–2 the six guardian angels appear, five with weapons and one with a writing tablet. The one was to “put a mark on the foreheads” of those who grieved for the “detestable things” done in the temple, and the other angels were to put to death all those who did not have the mark. The particular mark was a ט (*tāv*), the last letter in the Hebrew alphabet. Krodel (1989: 182) points out that in ancient writing it would appear as + or X, which to Christians would symbolize either the cross or the name “Christ” (the first letter of which was X). The sign on the forehead is antithetical to the “mark of the beast” in 13:16, placed on the forehead or right hand (also, the “great prostitute” in 17:5 had her title written on her forehead). In this book there is no neutrality. One is a follower of (and owned by) God or of Satan. There is no middle ground, so in this book a “seeker” is still a follower of Satan, for to fail to come to Christ is tantamount to becoming a slave of Satan (cf. John 8:31–59, esp. v. 33 [the Jewish claim to be Abraham’s children] and v. 44 [Jesus’ claim that the devil was their father]). A brand or tattoo on the forehead of a slave was common in the ancient world as a sign of ownership, and there were also religious tattoos to show allegiance to a particular god. Similarly, God’s slaves had his sign on their foreheads to indicate both ownership and allegiance.

There is considerable debate as to the exact Christian experience alluded to in the “seal” metaphor. Many (Sweet, Prigent, Boring, Roloff, Lohse) think it is a reference to baptism, primarily because Paul calls baptism a “seal” (2 Cor. 1:22; Eph. 1:13–14). However, baptism is not specifically mentioned in these texts, and if anything it would refer to the Holy Spirit, not baptism, as the seal. However, Aune (1998a: 455, 457–59) doubts that either baptism or the Holy Spirit fits the context here. He is probably correct, for in the context it means simply that the saints belong to and are protected by God. Moreover, this is set in an end-time context and is not a reference to the baptism of believers or the reception of the Spirit throughout history. Finally, it is the angel that has the seal, and so the act of sealing the saints here is done by God through his angel, protecting them from the judgments about to be inflicted in the trumpets and bowls.

(2) Sealing the Twelve Tribes (7:4–8)

John begins in an interesting way: “I heard the number of those who were sealed.” Bauckham (1993b: 55–56) sees a direct connection with 6:11, “until the number of their fellow slaves . . . is completed.” The numbers here, 12 x 12 x 1000, stress completeness. “The full number of the martyrs (144,000) is completed in this interval between the very approach of judgment (6:17) and the scene at the opening of the seventh seal, when all heaven is silent so that God may listen to the prayers of the saints and at last avenge their blood (8:1, 3–5)” (Beale 1993b: 55). This is in keeping with those interpreters who have seen the 144,000 to be specifically the martyrs in this final period rather than the Jewish people or the church as a whole (see the introduction to this section). This is problematic, however, because it cannot explain why the list of the twelve tribes is given here. To limit this to the martyrs does not quite fit the symbolism. The completion of the numbers does parallel 6:11, but this is a second completion rather than the same completion; this refers to the

completion of the number of the saints.

The primary debate is whether the 144,000 refers to Israel or the church. This is closely connected to the debate as to whether the group in 7:1–8 is the same group as the “great multitude . . . from every nation” in 7:9–17 (see the introduction to 7:1–8). Those who say the twelve tribes here are Jewish believers see them as two distinct groups, and those who see these as the whole church believe that chapter 7 describes one single group, the united church. The basis for the literal understanding of the twelve tribes as Jewish (see Walvoord, Seiss, Pentecost, Thomas) is primarily found in the phrase ἐκ πάσης φυλῆς υἱῶν Ἰσραὴλ (*ek pasēs phylēs huīōn Israēl*, from every tribe of the sons of Israel). They argue that “Israel” is always used of the Jewish people in the OT and NT, and that the emphasis on “every tribe” can hardly be spiritualized to refer to the church. Thomas (1992: 476) states, “No clear-cut example of the church being called ‘Israel’ exists in the NT or in ancient church writings until A.D. 160.” Moreover, to see this as the new Israel would be to ignore the literal meaning of the term and its use in Scripture. For Walvoord (1966: 143), “It would be rather ridiculous to carry the typology of Israel representing the church to the extent of dividing them up into twelve tribes as was done here, if it was the intent of the writer to describe the church.” In other words, they state that the detailed list of tribes and the literal use of “Israel” favor a literal understanding of the phrase as a reference to the Jewish people.

However, there are many indications that John does mean the church, not the least of which is the centrality of the church throughout the book. Aside from this passage, there is no mention of Jewish believers apart from the Gentile church elsewhere in Revelation. In 21:12–14 the names of the twelve tribes are on the gates of the New Jerusalem, and the names of the twelve apostles are on the foundations. There it signifies the unity of the OT and the NT people of God in the New Jerusalem. Throughout the book, the emphasis is on one group, the faithful overcomers, and they are linked inextricably with the believers in the seven churches of chapters 2–3, composed of Gentile (probably predominant) and Jewish Christians. Moreover, the NT as a whole has a great deal of material on the church as the new or true Israel. Jesus most likely chose twelve disciples to signify the righteous remnant embodying true Israel and promised that they would “sit on twelve thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel” (Matt. 19:28). In Gal. 6:16 Paul says, “Peace and mercy to all who follow this rule, even to the Israel of God” (see LaVerdiere 1999: 543; C. Smith 1990: 111). Longenecker (1990: 298) writes,

all of the views that take “the Israel of God” to refer to Jews and not Gentiles . . . fail to take seriously enough the context of the Galatian letter itself. For in a letter where Paul is concerned to treat as indifferent the distinctions that separate Jewish and Gentile Christians and to argue for the equality of Gentile believers with Jewish believers it is difficult to see him at the very end of the letter pronouncing a benediction (or benedictions) that would serve to separate groups within the churches.

Three other passages demonstrate Paul’s view: Gal. 3:29, “If you belong to Christ, then are you Abraham’s seed”; Rom. 2:29, “a man is a Jew if he is one inwardly, and circumcision is circumcision of the heart by the Spirit”; and Phil. 3:3, “it is we who are the circumcision, who worship by the Spirit of God.” Finally, Peter describes the church as “a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation” (1 Pet. 2:9) in terms drawn from Isa. 43:20; 61:6; and Deut. 28:9. It is probable that Rev. 7:4–8 falls into this category, describing the church as a whole as the true Israel.

The purpose here is to stress the perfect completeness of the whole (note “every tribe”) “number” of the persevering faithful in the church in a threefold way: taking 12 (the number of completeness), then squaring it, and then multiplying by 1000, another symbol of completeness in the book (note also the “24 elders” of 4:4, the “12,000 stadia of 21:16, the “144 cubits” of 21:17, and the “twelve crops of fruit” of 22:2). Another issue is whether these are the saints of the final period

or the saints throughout history (again, see the introduction). Certainly the thrust of chapters 6 and 7 would favor that these are the believers of this final chapter in history, those who have refused to follow the beast. As discussed in the introduction, however, there is more than one layer of meaning in this book. The original readers in the seven churches were certainly meant to see this of themselves as well. In other words, the primary level of this narrative would indicate that the 144,000 are the “overcomers” of the tribulation period who remain true to Christ in the terrible persecution instigated by the beast. There will be many martyrs (6:9–11), but they will “conquer” Satan by giving up their lives (12:11). At the level of the book as a whole, it is also a message to the seven churches (and to us) to remain faithful to Christ. If we do so, we will be part of the 144,000 as well, whether we are martyred or not.

Bauckham (1993b: 215–29) provides cogent reasons for taking the 144,000 as not just the faithful church but even more so as “the messianic army” that will carry the banner of Christ and his gospel to the nations.^[5] He takes the two halves of the chapter as paralleling the two images of Christ as the “Lion” (5:5 = 7:1–8) and the “slain Lamb” (5:6 = 7:9–17). What makes this plausible is that Christ is called “the lion of the tribe of Judah” (the first tribe named in 7:5), and in 5:9 the Lamb “purchased people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation” (paralleling the “multitude from every nation, tribe, people, and language” in 7:9). Furthermore, the numbering of the tribes has the form of a census, and in the OT a census was done to determine the size of the army in preparation for battle. At Qumran this became the form of the eschatological army of God that would liberate Israel from oppressors (see 1QM 1.2–3). This army motif has two aspects: first, the army of Christ will be militant in its witness to the earth-dwellers in winning some from the nations to Christ (Rev. 7:9; 14:6–7) and in its willingness to achieve victory via martyrdom (so Bauckham); second, the army will be part of Christ’s army that will conquer the army of the beast (17:14; cf. 2:26–27). Yet it must be said that while this may well form an aspect of the thrust of this passage, it is by no means the primary emphasis. The persevering saints as owned and protected by God form the core meaning. The church militant is a secondary aspect.

The list of the twelve tribes is problematic, for no list in the OT has this exact order. It has generally been recognized that the order follows the order of the patriarchs according to their mothers (with certain changes), seen especially in Gen. 35:23–26.^[6] The matriarchal order is: (1) Leah: Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar, Zebulun; (2) Rachel: Joseph, Benjamin; (3) Zilpah: Gad, Asher; (4) Bilhah: Dan, Naphtali. C. Smith (1990a: 112–15) notes that the sons of the handmaid Zilpah are moved up in the list to indicate the incorporation of the Gentiles. Bauckham (1991: 100–102) finds this too allegorical and simply labels this a normative list along matriarchal lines. C. Smith (see his response to Bauckham in 1995: 213–15) is probably correct about the reasons for the particular order but overstates the symbolic value.

There are two particular difficulties: Judah is first rather than Reuben (Jacob’s firstborn son); and Manasseh the son of Joseph replaces Dan and is listed alongside Joseph. There are twenty lists of tribes in the OT, and they disagree quite remarkably with one another. It is true that Judah is first in many lists organized geographically (listing the tribes in terms of their territory, beginning in the south and moving north; cf. Num. 34:19–29; Josh. 21:4–7; 1 Chron. 12:24–37), but the order of the other tribes in 7:5–8 does not fit those lists (see Bauckham 1993b: 220–21). As is nearly universally agreed, Judah is first here because the Messiah came from that tribe (Matt. 1:3; 2:6; Heb. 7:14). Especially if this list does constitute the army of the Messiah, this order would be natural, for the Messiah and his tribe would lead the others into battle.

The absence of Dan is normally explained by the fact that the tribe fell into idolatry. When the

tribe of Dan settled in Laish (Judg. 18), they took household gods, a carved image, and an idol and set them up in their new home (18:14–15, 18–21, 30–31). In 1 Kings 12:25–30 Jeroboam set up golden calves in two places, Bethel and Dan. In light of the problem with idolatry in the cults of Pergamum and Thyatira (Rev. 2:14, 20) and the problem of idols in the book (9:20; 21:8; 22:15), this explanation would make a great deal of sense. There is no direct exegetical evidence that this was the case, however, and Bauckham for one thinks this was purely arbitrary: Dan was omitted in order to make the list twelve (1993b: 223; so also Aune 1998a: 462–63). Still, I think that the idolatry theory is viable and in keeping with the data.^[7]

The presence of Joseph and Manasseh is also interesting. Ephraim and Manasseh were the two sons of Joseph, and normally their listing depended on whether Levi was mentioned. If Levi was omitted, Joseph was also omitted and both Ephraim and Manasseh were named among the twelve tribes (cf. Deut. 27:12–13 [with Levi] and Num. 1:5–15 [without Levi]). Here, however, Levi is included and so is Joseph, but Manasseh seemingly replaces Dan. Some have tried to explain this by supposing that a scribe mistook the abbreviation ΔAN for MAN (Manasseh), but there is no evidence for such a mistake, and so it remains nothing but a conjecture. One of the few viable explanations is again that of Bauckham (1993b: 222), who hypothesizes that the census of Num. 1:20–43 may be the background, especially 1:32, which departs from the usual formula (the other eleven tribes read “from the descendants of”) to say “from the sons of Joseph, from the descendants of Ephraim,” just prior to 1:34, which reads “from the descendants of Manasseh.” Due to that precedent John may have replaced the more usual “Ephraim” in this type of military census with “Joseph.”

In conclusion, the list of tribes stresses the completeness of the people of God seen as the messianic army of the lion of Judah. They have been “sealed” by God from the outpouring of his wrath and given a twofold task: being militant witnesses for the eternal gospel as they call the nations to repentance (12:11a) and participating in the defeat of the dragon both by martyrdom (12:11b) and by forming the army of the victorious Christ at his return (17:14). Boring (1989: 131) points out that the number 1,000 has a military connotation and speaks of “the battalions of Israel (cf. Num. 31:14, 48; Deut. 1:15; I Sam. 8:12; 22:7; II Sam. 18:1, 4).” Both the number 144,000 and the list of tribes are symbolic of the complete number of saints God has called out from the world to form his army.

Summary and Contextualization

While this is primarily a description of the church in the final period of tribulation and martyrdom, for John and his readers it also had a contemporary thrust applying to their own lives of suffering and persecution. Therefore the promises of this passage have great application for us. In 7:1–3 it is encouraging to know that God is indeed holding back the winds of destruction. As 2 Pet. 3:9 says, God “is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.” As in Rev. 6:11 and 7:4, the end will not come until two things have occurred: every saint has been “sealed,” and the number of martyrs has been completed. The same patience of God that was at work in the days of Noah (1 Pet. 3:20) and will be at work during “the great tribulation” is also at work today, and every believer can rejoice in God’s compassionate steadfastness.

It is even more encouraging to know that we have been “sealed” by the Holy Spirit (Eph. 1:13; 4:30) and that our future is guaranteed by God (Eph. 1:14; 1 Pet. 1:4), whose power (Eph. 1:19–21; 1

Pet. 1:5) is at all times exerted on our behalf. Here we see that we are also “sealed” to keep us from the outpouring of God’s wrath on this evil world in the last days (Rev. 7:4–8; cf. also 3:10). Again, while this is a futurist passage describing the events of the final period of human history, it also applies to the Christians of John’s day and thus to us as well. Those who interpret the twelve tribes here as a symbol of the whole church will see this as a promise that we are “not appointed for wrath but for salvation” (1 Thess. 5:9). Yet this does not exempt us from persecution (Mark 10:30). God keeps his people from the effects of the seals, trumpets, and bowls, but the Antichrist and his followers go to war against us (13:7). The call of this whole book is for faithful perseverance in the midst of the opposition we face from the world (see the “overcomer” passages in the seven letters as well as 12:11; 13:9–10; 14:12; 16:15; 21:7–8; 22:12, 14).

ii. Great Multitude in Heaven (7:9–17)

The saints who are sealed on earth are next seen in heaven (see arguments below) wearing the white robes of triumph and holding palm branches in a reenactment of the Feast of Tabernacles (7:9). Draper (1983: 135–38) develops this imagery, asserting that the scene builds on Zech. 14:1–21. There the feast is connected with the pilgrimage of the Gentiles to Jerusalem in the last days, and here the great multitude have white robes (= the purity of the feast) and palm branches. They celebrate the great victory of God and the Lamb (7:10) and then are joined by the heavenly host, who sing another sevenfold praise reminiscent of chapters 4–5 (7:11–12). This obviously causes John considerable confusion, for one of the celestial elders tells John both the identity and origin (7:13) of those with the white robes: they are the saints who have emerged victorious from the “great tribulation” and have kept themselves pure (7:14). Their reward is to serve God continually as priests (7:15a) and to experience both the Shekinah presence of God and the shepherding activity of the Lamb (7:15b, 17a). As a result they will never again suffer the deprivations of this life (7:16, 17b).

- (1) Scene of worship (7:9–12)
 - (a) Worship of multitude (7:9–10)
 - (b) Worship of celestial host (7:11–12)
- (2) Identification of saints by the elder (7:13–17)
 - (a) Basic identification (7:13–14)
 - (b) Results of perseverance and purity (7:15–17)
 - (i) Presence and service before God (7:15)
 - (ii) Removal of all suffering (7:16)
 - (iii) Actions of the Lamb and God on their behalf (7:17)

Exegesis and Exposition

⁹After these things I looked, and behold, a great multitude whom no one could number, from every nation and from tribes and peoples and languages, was standing before the throne and before the lamb wearing white robes and with palm branches in their hands, ¹⁰shouting with a mighty cry,

“Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne
and to the Lamb.”

¹¹And all the angels stood around the throne and the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell down before the throne on their faces and worshiped God, ¹²saying,

“Amen!

Praise and glory and wisdom
and thanksgiving and honor and power and strength
belong to our God (who lives) forever and ever.”

¹³And one of the elders answered and said to me, “Who are those wearing white robes, and where do they come from?”

¹⁴And I said to him, “My lord, you know.”

And he said to me, “These are the ones who come out of the great tribulation and have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.

¹⁵Because of this they are before the throne of God,
and they serve him day and night in his temple,
and the one who sits on the throne will spread his tent over them.

¹⁶They will never again hunger or thirst,
the sun will never again beat on them,
nor any scorching heat.

¹⁷Because the Lamb who is at the center of the throne will shepherd them, and will guide them to life-giving springs of water, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.”

(1) Scene of Worship (7:9–12)

(a) Worship of Multitude (7:9–10)

We need to get the chronology of 6:9–7:17 straight (so long as we realize this is secondary to the narrative order). There are three scenes. Chronologically, they begin with 7:1–8, where the saints are sealed before the “great tribulation” (7:14) begins. Then in 6:9–11 we see God sealing the martyrs who are sacrificed for Christ during that time. Finally, we see the victorious believers in heaven after the battle has been won.^[1] Boring (1989: 131) points out, “As 7:1–8 presents the church militant on earth, sealed and drawn up in battle formation before the coming struggle, 7:9–17 presents the church after the battle, triumphant in heaven.” The opening words, “after these things I looked,” occur at 4:1; 7:1, 9; 15:5; 18:1; and at 19:1 with “after these things I heard.” In most instances they indicate a new vision, but in 15:5 they lead into the second part of the same vision. Therefore they do not demand a major break, and here also we have the second part of the same vision. The saints who are sealed on earth in 7:1–8 are in heaven rejoicing in God’s salvation in 7:9–17. Καὶ ἰδοὺ (*kai idou*, and behold) highlights the change in scene from earth to heaven. Since ἰδοὺ is a demonstrative particle built from the aorist root of ὁράω, it intensifies the “I looked” and calls for careful attention to what follows. John first sees ὄχλος πολὺς, ὃν ἀριθμῆσαι αὐτὸν οὐδεὶς ἐδύνατο (*ochlos polys hon arithmēsai auton oudeis edynato*, a great multitude that no one could number).^[2] This innumerable crowd contrasts with the emphasis on the number of martyrs in 6:11 and the 144,000 who were “numbered,” in 7:4–8 (both groups were “numbered,” unlike the multitude here). As Bauckham (1993b: 223) states, this emphasis “echoes the promise of God to the patriarchs that their descendants would be innumerable (Gen 13:16; 15:5; 32:12; Hos 1:10; Jub 13.20; 14.4–5; Heb 11:12 . . .).” It probably indicates that the martyrs take their place with all the saints who were victorious and are now in heaven. There could be three groups, with each one part of the following: the martyrs of 6:11 are part of those “sealed” in 7:4–8, and these in turn form part of the “great multitude” in 7:9. It is more likely, however, that there are two groups, the saints and those among the saints who were martyred. The “innumerably great multitude” is an elaboration of the 144,000, a number that would have indeed sounded quite large to the Christians in the seven churches. Now they are told that the actual number is far greater—in fact, more than they could count.

There is some debate as to whether this multitude refers only to the martyrs of this final period. We must begin with 7:14, which identifies the multitude as “who have come out of the great tribulation” yet have “washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the lamb.” There is no stress here on martyrdom. The metaphor of “washing their robes” and making them “white” speaks of moral and spiritual revival, of ridding themselves of the filthy sin of this world and becoming pure before God.^[3] Thus the emphasis is on victory over the forces of evil and faithfulness to Christ in the midst of the terrible conflagration, and there are two interconnected paths to victory, that of perseverance in general and that of martyrdom in particular.

This multitude is drawn “from every nation and tribes and peoples and tongues.” This parallels the list in 5:9 (Beale 1999: 426 argues correctly that they are one and the same group) but with a slightly different order. This is a grammatically clumsy list, with the singular “every nation”

followed by three plurals. Bauckham (1993b: 225) says that the singular “every nation” echoes the promise to the patriarchs in Gen. 17:4 (“You will be the father of many nations”), while the plural “tribes” brings in “all the tribes of Israel” from 7:4–8, suggesting that Jewish and Gentile Christians together form the whole people of God. This may be true, but there is more to it than that. “Every nation” continues the stress in the book on the universal mission of the church to the “nations” (10:11; 11:9; 13:7; 14:6; 17:15; 21:24, 26) and probably recapitulates the OT stress on the procession of the nations to God (Isa. 11:10; 66:18–21). Therefore, the singular “every nation” is the primary emphasis, and the other three supplement it.

These saints are ἑστῶτες[4] ἐνώπιον τοῦ θρόνου καὶ ἐνώπιον τοῦ ἀρνίου (*estōtes enōpion tou thronou kai enōpion tou arniou*, standing before the throne and before the Lamb). There are two contrasts here: first, like the four angels “standing at the four corners of the earth” (7:1), these victorious believers are “standing before the throne and the Lamb.” The angels function on the earth before the great battle, and the saints function in heaven after it. Second, in 6:16 the throne and the Lamb are filled with wrath against the earth-dwellers, while here they welcome the conquering saints home to heaven. The divine throne means judgment in chapter 6 and reward in chapter 7. By being placed “before the throne,” the believers are given a place of honor as they receive their reward for faithfulness. In fact, this is the first time anyone other than a celestial being has appeared before the throne in this book. Moreover, once more we see the unity between God on his throne and the Lamb, as they function together.

In keeping with the “white robes” given to the overcomers in 3:4–5 and those given to the martyrs in 6:11, these victorious Christians are περιβεβλημένους[5] στολὰς λευκάς (*peribēblēmenous stolas leukas*, wearing white robes). These are the robes of purity but especially of victory,[6] resembling here a Roman triumph in which the conquering general would lead a victory procession through the streets of Rome wearing a pure white toga. This establishes a special relationship with the martyrs, who were given the white robes by God (6:11) that they now wear before the throne. In addition to the white robes, they had “palm branches in their hands.” Palm branches were a sign of rejoicing on a festive occasion, such as the triumphal entry of Christ (John 12:13). The contexts are similar, for the crowds then thought Jesus a conquering king, and here the imagery is also a celebration of victory (symbolized by a palm branch for both Jews and Gentiles). In 1 Macc. 13:51 the Jewish soldiers waved palm branches at the liberation of Jerusalem from the Syrians. Some (Kraft, Sweet, Chilton, Draper, Aune, Beale) see an explicit allusion to the Feast of Tabernacles (cf. Lev. 23:40–43; Neh. 8:15; 2 Macc. 10:7), with imagery celebrating both the harvest and the delivery from Egypt (when Israel dwelt in tents). Primarily, though, the white garments and palm fronds signify victory.

The parallel with the martyrs of 6:9–11 is further enhanced in 7:10 as the multitude “cries out with a loud voice,” duplicating the martyrs’ cry but with a difference. Their plea was for justice, while the cry here is rejoicing for the justice that was given them by God. The worshipful cry begins with ἡ σωτηρία τῷ θεῷ ἡμῶν (*hē sōtēria tō theō hēmōn*, salvation to our God). Many (Caird; Ellingworth 1983: 444–45; Bauckham 1993b: 225–26; Aune) point out that σωτηρία here partakes of its use in Ps. 3:8, “From the Lord comes deliverance,”[7] where the term in both Hebrew and Greek means “deliverance” or “victory” (see also Rev. 12:10; 19:1). This then is the celebration of the victory achieved by God over his enemies as well as the deliverance of his sealed followers. In this sense 7:1–8 is the promise and 7:9–17 celebrates the fulfillment. At the same time, the term could transcend this meaning and connote spiritual deliverance from sin, as seen in 7:14 (“washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the lamb”). Although this is certainly valid in the larger

context, the primary thrust here is the “victory” achieved by God on behalf of his people. The term is found twice more in this book: in 12:10 in the context of the defeat of the dragon, and in 19:1 in the context of the destruction of Babylon. In both cases “victory” is the appropriate meaning.

The dative τῷ θεῷ ἡμῶν could be possessive (“belongs to our God”) or instrumental (“has been achieved by God”). In this instance with the copulative verb presupposed, a possessive force is most likely. As BDF §189 states, the genitive normally places the emphasis on the possessor, and the dative on the object possessed. Thus here the stress is on God’s victory over the forces of evil. The emphasis on “our God” shows his special relationship with his people. Elsewhere, “our God” is primarily on the lips of the angels (7:3, 12; 19:1, 5), so where his people utter this covenant formula (here and in 12:10) it has special meaning. Moreover, God is once more seen “sitting on the throne” (6:16; 7:9), for it is his sovereign power that has achieved the victory. Finally, “the Lamb” stands alongside God as “savior” of his people. It is the Lamb who in 5:5–6 became the conquering ram and the lion of Judah by virtue of his sacrificial death, and it is the Lamb who in 19:11–21 achieves the final victory.

(b) Worship of Celestial Host (7:11–12)

In a scene reminiscent of chapters 4 and 5, we now see “all the angels,” the outermost circle around the throne (5:11). There they “encircled the throne and the living creatures and the elders,” while here they “stood[8] around the throne and the elders and the four living creatures.” John wants to take the reader back to that earlier scene and re-create the awesome spectacle of the throne room. Yet this is even stronger than 5:11, for there it was “many angels” while here it is “all the angels.” Also, the angels join the multitude of redeemed saints as they too “stand around the throne” (cf. 7:9, where the multitude is “standing before the throne”).

In 4:10 the elders fell down before the throne, in 5:8 the living creatures and the elders prostrated themselves before God, and in 5:14 the elders again “fell down and worshiped.” This fourth time that celestial beings fall before the Lord in joyful worship has greater detail, for here we are told explicitly that they fall “on their faces,” an addition that adds emphasis to the scene. The priestly function of angels continues as they “worship” God (cf. 4:10; 5:14; 11:16; 19:4). While the doxology of the multitude is addressed to God and the Lamb, this praise is given directly to God.

Their hymn in 5:12 follows the sevenfold pattern of the hymn of the angels in 5:12, but with several differences. First, it is framed by ἀμήν (*amēn*, amen) and is the only hymn in the Bible like this.[9] In Revelation ἀμήν concludes a doxology (1:6) and doxological hymns (1:7; 5:14; 19:4) and has an obvious liturgical function, affirming the contents before the Lord. Therefore, it is most likely that the first ἀμήν is the angels’ affirmation of the hymn of the multitude. As Swete says, “The angels, while adding their ‘Amen’ to the doxology of the Church, offer their own tribute in other words” (1911: 101; so also Lohmeyer, Roloff, Krodell, Aune; contra Mounce, Giesen, Beale).

The sevenfold praise contains six of the seven items from 5:12, and replaces “wealth” there with ἡ εὐχαριστία (*hē eucharistia*, thanksgiving), drawn from the praise of the living creatures in 4:9 (these are the only two uses of this term in Revelation). One important difference between 5:12 and this passage is that the article is not repeated after each attribute there, while the article is found with each quality here. Therefore, in 5:12 the sevenfold praise forms a single whole, while here each is stressed as a separate attribute of God. Moreover, what makes each quality distinct here from 4:9, 11, and 5:12–13 is the context celebrating the great eschatological victory of God over the forces of evil. The best organization for this sevenfold acclamation is to recognize two word pairs,

“praise”/“thanksgiving” and “glory”/“honor.” This leads to a 3–4 construction, with each of the two sections beginning with an acclamation of praise. Therefore this list begins with ἡ εὐλογία (*hē eulogia*, praise; only in 5:12, 13, and here) as the natural response of the angels to the joy of seeing God deliver the saints. In 1 Pet. 1:12 we are told that the angels are intensely interested in God’s salvific plan for his people and “long to look” into it. When they see our salvation come to fruition and the victory finalized, they will naturally erupt with “praise.”

Next, ἡ δόξα (*hē doxa*, glory) refers to the “glory” and majesty of God revealed in his final victory over his enemies. All the “glory” of the Bible and of this book is focused on this moment, when his plan of salvation is realized and the eternal glory of his people is about to begin. Ἡ σοφία (*hē sophia*, wisdom) is the divine wisdom that shaped this world and has now given it final redemption. God knew “before the foundation of this world” how he would save it (Matt. 25:34; Eph. 1:4; Heb. 4:3; 1 Pet. 1:20), and his wisdom has now been revealed in his deeds. Ἡ εὐχαριστία parallels “praise” and refers to that natural outpouring of thanks for all God has done for his creation in bringing about the final victory. Ἡ τιμή (*hē timē*, honor) parallels “glory,” and the two are combined in 4:11; 5:12, 13. In light of his deliverance of his people, God is worthy of “honor” from all creation. The final two, ἡ δύναμις καὶ ἡ ἰσχύς (*hē dynamis kai hē ischys*, power and strength) are separated in 5:12 but are near synonyms. “Power” (also in 4:11; 5:12; 12:10; 19:1) refers to the omnipotence of “God Almighty” (1:8; 4:8; 11:17; 15:3; 16:7, 14; 19:6, 15; 21:22) that has produced the victory over evil forces too great for human beings to comprehend, and “strength” (only in 5:12 and here) is the application of God’s power in salvation history, that is, its application in working out his plan for the salvation of his creation.

This doxological acclamation is directed τῷ θεῷ ἡμῶν (*tō theō hēmōn*, to our God) and has a similar force to “our God” in 7:3. Mounce (1998: 163) says that 7:12 is directed to both God and the Lamb, even though the Lamb is not mentioned. In light of the separate hymns of praise in chapters 4 and 5, however, it is best to see this as directed to God alone, as the text states. The final aspect, εἰς τοὺς αἰῶνας τῶν αἰώνων (*eis tous aiōnas tōn aiōnōn*, forever and ever) could be taken two ways grammatically: the ascription of praise could be seen as eternal worship, or God could be seen as an eternal God. “Forever” is used of eternal glory or praise in 1:6 and 5:13, and of the eternal God/Christ in 1:18; 4:9, 10; 10:6; 11:15; 15:3, 7. In light of the double emphasis in 4:9, 10 on the God “who lives forever and ever,” one could make a strong argument for the latter, with the verb to be presupposed, “to our God who is forever and ever.” Yet all these statements are in prose passages, and the two doxologies in 1:6 and 5:13 celebrate the eternal praise and glory of God. In both cases, however, the phrase is linked directly to the praise terms, while here it is in closest proximity to “our God.” Therefore, it more likely means “our God (who lives) forever and ever.”

(2) Identification of Saints by the Elder (7:13–17)

(a) Basic Identification (7:13–14)

The rhetorical question by “one of the elders” is intended to help John (and the reader) with a vexing question: Who are these people in heaven, and how did they get there? From 4:4 we believe this is an angel, so this is the first instance in the book of a common apocalyptic motif, the angel as mediator and interpreter (see also 17:1–18; 21:9–27; 22:8–16). This technique is fairly common in prophetic and apocalyptic literature (Jer. 11:1ff.; Ezek. 40:1–2; Dan. 7:15–16; Amos 7:7–8; 8:2–3; Zech. 4:1–2; Apoc. Abr. 10.1–2; Asc. Isa. 9.25–26) to explain a vision. Here the elder/angel helps John understand the connection between the glorified saints in 7:9–10 and both the martyrs of 6:9–11

and the sealed believers in 7:1–8, and links this with the description of the saints in 1:5b–6 as well as with the description of God and the Lamb in chapters 4 and 5.

The question is introduced by a strange verb, ἀπεκρίθη (*apekrithē*, answered), for as yet no question has been asked, and the “answer” itself will come in the form of a question. As several point out (R. Charles, Beckwith, Thomas, Aune), however, this is a Semitic idiom that leads into an explanation of the preceding utterance; in other words, it presupposes John’s unasked question. As Aune (1998a: 472) says, in Revelation John never asks the meaning of symbols, but the interpreting angel volunteers an explanation at key points. The elder’s response focuses on one aspect of 7:9, “those who wear white robes.” By focusing on the white robes, the elder links the group with those wearing white robes in 3:4–5 (though there they just “dress in white”) and especially the martyrs in 6:11. Thus he asks John two questions. The first, τίνες εἰσίν (*tines eisin*, who are they?), is answered implicitly in the whole response of 7:14b–17. The second, πόθεν ἦλθον (*pothen elthon*, where do they come from?), is answered explicitly in 7:14b.

John replies^[10] in 7:14 as one would expect. He knows the angel does not expect him to answer, so he says, “My lord, you know.” The use of the titular “my lord”^[11] shows the reverence John has for the angel. In 19:10a and 22:8, John prostrates himself at the feet of the angel, who then tells him to quit showing such reverence, because “I am your fellow slave” (19:10b; 22:9). There is an important lesson here. Angels are not superior beings in God’s creation but stand beside humans as equal creatures in God’s order. When John adds “you know” (the “you” is emphatic, “you, not I”), he is confessing his ignorance and allowing the elder to answer his own question.

The elder’s answer has two parts. First, he tells John that these are the ones who have come out of τῆς θλίψεως τῆς μεγάλης (*tēs thlipseōs tēs megalēs*, the great tribulation). R. Charles (1920: 1.213) believes that the present participle retains its temporal force, and that the martyred souls are still in the process of arriving from the terrible persecution. In this context, however, οἱ ἐρχόμενοι (*hoi erchomenoi*, who are coming) is a substantival clause, and the temporal element is thereby drawn from the larger context.^[12] The finite verbs that follow in this sentence are aorist (“they have washed . . . made them white”), and so is the verb in the question that leads into this response (“from where have they come?”). Thus the atmosphere of the whole deals with an event that has already occurred, and all the redeemed saints are standing before the throne (v. 9). Further debate centers on the articular τῆς θλίψεως τῆς μεγάλης. Is it a technical term, referring to *the* great tribulation, or is it simply descriptive of the terrible persecution that produced the martyrs? Also, does it refer just to that final period of “tribulation” (the three and a half years of this book) that will immediately precede the eschaton, or to the whole period of persecution between the advents (so Hendriksen, P. Hughes, Wall, Beale)? There is no evidence in the book that this is a title for this final period, for all the other uses of θλίψις in this book occur in general contexts dealing with the suffering of the saints (1:9; 2:9, 10) or of the followers of Jezebel (2:22). Therefore, it is not a technical term in this book. It is probably an echo of Dan. 12:1, the “time of distress [LXX καιρὸς θλίψεως] such as has not happened from the beginnings of nations until then.” But with the article it does denote a particular “tribulation,” and in the context of Revelation it most likely refers to that final war against the saints waged by the dragon (chap. 12) and his followers, the earth-dwellers (so Bauckham 1993b: 226; Aune 1998a: 473–74).^[13] As God exerts his wrath upon the evil world in the form of the seals, trumpets, and bowls, the world retaliates with its own vengeance against Christ’s followers. God allows the dragon for this short period (Mark 13:20) to “conquer” the saints (Rev. 13:7), resulting in “days of distress unequalled from the beginning, when God created the world, until now—and never to be equaled again” (Mark 13:19, in which the

destruction of Jerusalem is a proleptic anticipation of this period). However, these very tribulations are the victory of the church (Rev. 12:11) and of God (7:10).

This victory through sacrifice is anchored not just in their faithfulness but in the final sacrifice of Christ. In 1:5b we are told that Christ “has freed us from our sins by his blood”; in 5:6 it is the “slain lamb” that has produced the final triumph over the forces of evil and has “purchased people for God” (5:9); and in 12:11 we learn that the believers “overcame [Satan] by the blood of the Lamb.” Here their true deliverance occurs ἐν[14] τῷ αἵματι τοῦ ἀρνίου (*en tō haimati tou arniou*, by the blood of the Lamb). The blood is Christ’s “sacrifice of atonement” (Rom. 3:25) as well as the ransom payment that frees us from sin (Eph. 1:7). Nielsen (1992: 131–32) sees Christ here as the good shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep. As a result, his blood cleanses us (Heb. 9:23) and purifies us (1 John 1:7) from sin. Therefore, through their faithfulness in the midst of terrible tribulation and the blood of Christ, these redeemed saints ἐπλυναν τὰς στολὰς αὐτῶν καὶ ἐλεύκαναν αὐτάς (*eplynan tas stolas autōn kai eleukanan autas*, washed their robes and made them white). The aorist tenses do not point to a once-for-all event (that is only the force of the aorist if other contextual clues so indicate) but to the completeness of the effects of Christ’s blood in its salvific effects. The imagery of washing their garments may allude back to the consecration of Israel in preparation for Mount Sinai (Exod. 19), as the people washed their clothes in preparation for the appearance of Yahweh on the third day (Exod. 19:10, 14). As the believers here “washed their robes,”[15] they “made them white.” The idea of sin as dirty clothes can be found in Isa. 64:6 and Zech. 3:3. Psalm 51:7 says, “wash me, and I will be whiter than snow,” and Isa. 1:18 states, “Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow.” Here the imagery differs from Rev. 6:11, where they are “given a white robe” to wear, while here they themselves “make them white.” The difference is at the heart of the gospel. As Paul says, “For by grace you are saved through faith” (Eph. 2:8). Salvation is the gift of God, made possible by him alone, and we participate by faith. The idea of being made white by blood certainly sounds paradoxical at first, but in light of OT sacrificial imagery and its application in the NT to the blood of Christ, it makes perfect sense.[16]

(b) Results of Perseverance and Purity (7:15–17)

The elder then turns from prose to poetry. These verses have several signs of a hymn, for there is rhythm and a series of connecting conjunctions that give an air of parallelism to the whole. This does not mean John is quoting a previously existing credal hymn. Rather, the elder has given his answer in the form of poetry or high prose. There are three parts: their presence and service before God (7:15), the removal of all suffering (7:16, 17c), and the actions of the Lamb and of God on their behalf (7:17a–b).[17] The introductory particle διὰ τοῦτο (*dia touto*, on account of this) shows that 7:15–17 are based on the redemptive acts of 7:14 and the faithfulness of the saints celebrated in 7:9–14. They detail the rewards given to those who “washed their garments and made them white in the blood of the Lamb” (7:14). There is disagreement as to whether this occurs at the millennial time (20:4–6) or in eternity (21:3–5). The many parallels with chapter 21 (the throne of God, no hunger or thirst, no tears or sun, the living water) would favor eternity as the focus. The mention of “day and night” (21:25—there will be no night) and the temple (21:22—there will be no temple) could favor a millennial setting but are simply part of the imagery of this hymn and should not be taken literally. Therefore, this describes the eternal blessedness of the saints in heaven.

(i) Presence and Service before God (7:15)

The first part of the “hymn” describes the relationship of the heaven-dwellers to God with three elements. First, εἰσιν ἐνώπιον τοῦ θρόνου τοῦ θεοῦ (*eisin enōpion tou thronou tou theou*, they are before the throne of God). This forms a single unit with the first part of the elder’s response to John’s query: “They have come out of the great tribulation . . . [and] are before the throne of God.” The verb εἰσιν does not so much mean that they exist in front of the throne as that they stand before the throne. Because they have white robes washed in the blood, they are worthy to stand in God’s presence and serve him. A similar image is used in Eph. 2:6, “And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms,” building on Christ raised and seated at the right hand of God in Eph. 1:20. As Lincoln (1990: 106–7) says of “seated with him,” “If believers have been given a share in Christ’s resurrection life, they can also be said to share in the triumph of its heavenly aspect.” To sit in the heavenly court is to know power and victory. Yet it must be said that this victory for the believer now is true in the spiritual realm (= the “heavenly realms”), but in Revelation it is true with finality. Now the believer sits with God, then we will stand before the throne!

Second, λατρεύουσιν αὐτῷ ἡμέρας καὶ νυκτὸς ἐν τῷ ναῷ αὐτοῦ (*latreuousin autō hēmeras kai nyktos en tō naō autou*, they serve him day and night in his temple). It is likely that in the Apocalypse the throne of God is in the heavenly temple as here. Λατρεύω is a rich term in Scripture, meaning both service and worship. The basic idea is to serve another for the sake of reward or pay. Strathmann (*TDNT* 4:60) makes an interesting observation: It is used seventy times in the LXX to translate Hebrew שָׁמַד (šmd, to serve), always when there was a religious sense. Whenever שָׁמַד dealt with human relations, the LXX would use δουλεύειν. Thus in the OT it normally had a cultic and priestly connotation, referring both to the ritual worship of God and to a general life of worship (e.g., Exod. 23:25; Deut. 6:13; Josh. 22:27).

This religious component is carried over into the NT, but in a more general sense. The emphasis on cultic worship appears only in OT allusions. The primary emphasis is on the whole life as sacrificial worship surrendered to God, as in Rom. 12:1 (“offer your bodies as living sacrifices . . . this is your spiritual act of worship”) or Phil. 3:3 (“it is we who are the circumcision, who worship by the Spirit of God”). In Revelation this idea would be linked with the privilege of 1:6, that Christ “has indeed made us royalty, priests to his God and Father.” This theme of the priesthood of believers (see also 5:10; 20:6) is central in this verse as well, but here we see the culmination of the priestly activity of believers now in the worship of God in eternity ἡμέρας καὶ νυκτός (*hēmeras kai nyktos*, day and night; the genitive stresses time within which; cf. N. Turner 1963: 235). The idiom means constant activity, as in the constant worship of Anna in the temple in Luke 2:37, the ongoing labor of Paul in 2 Thess. 3:8, or the eternal torment of the false trinity in the lake of fire in Rev. 20:10. Aune (1998a: 475, from Schürer) points out that worship in the Jerusalem temple normally ceased from the evening sacrifice to the morning sacrifice, during which time the temple gates were closed. But in the heavenly temple worship will be continuous.

This worship will take place ἐν τῷ ναῷ αὐτοῦ (*en tō naō autou*, in his temple); compare 22:3 (“his servants will serve him”), where the worship occurs in the New Jerusalem. This is the second time ναός is used in the book (cf. 3:12),^[18] and it introduces the idea of a heavenly temple (see also 11:19; 14:15, 17; 15:5, 6, 8; 16:1, 17). Yet at the same time it is clear that there will be no temple in eternity (21:22), so the passages dealing with a heavenly temple must be taken as metaphorical.^[19] The idea of a heavenly temple is built on Ps. 11:4, “The LORD is in his holy temple, the LORD is on his

heavenly throne” (repeated in Hab. 2:20; in both places scholars are convinced the heavenly temple is in view). This is continued in the apocalyptic vision of a restored temple built by God for his people in Ezek. 40–48. There this ideal temple transcended the Solomonic temple by being on a “very high mountain” (Ezek. 40:2; Mount Zion was only a hill) and envisaging an eternal dwelling of God among his people (Ezek. 43:7). In the NT the cultic function of the temple was taken first by the blood of Jesus (Heb. 9:1–14) and then by the church as a worshiping community (1 Cor. 3:16–17; 2 Cor. 6:16–18). The Apocalypse carries that vision to a new level with its idea of the ideal temple in heaven, where God dwells among his resurrected saints.

Third, ὁ καθήμενος ἐπὶ τοῦ θρόνου σκηνώσει ἐπ’ αὐτούς (*ho kathēmenos epitou thronou skēnōsei ep’ autous*, the one who sits on the throne will spread his tent over them). This is a fantastic image that brings together several key biblical themes. It is the omnipotent enthroned God (see 7:9, 11, 15a above) who will “tabernacle” over them. The idea of God “tabernacled” over his people brings up all the imagery of the Shekinah in the OT. Both the Hebrew (שְׁכִינָה, *šākan*) and Greek terms (σκηνώω) derive from the basic term meaning “tent” and thus mean to “dwell.” The tabernacle was a “tent,” and in Exod. 25:8 God said, “Then let them make a sanctuary for me, and I will dwell among them.” This idea of God “dwelling” among his people became the basis for the concept of “Shekinah” (from Hebrew שְׁכִינָה, cf. Exod. 29:45; Lev. 26:11–12; Deut. 12:5, 11; Zech. 2:10; 8:3). The two main symbols for this were the “pillar of cloud” by day and the “pillar of fire” by night as “the LORD went ahead of them . . . to guide them on their way” (Exod. 13:21) in the wilderness. These signified the glory of God dwelling among his people for guidance and protection. After the construction of the tabernacle and then the temple, God dwelt in the Holy of Holies at the midpoint between the cherubim on the ark (1 Sam. 4:4), and indeed a cloud descended on both the tabernacle (Exod. 40:34–38) and the temple (1 Kings 8:10–13), and “the glory of Yahweh filled the temple” (2 Chron. 7:1–3). In intertestamental Judaism “Shekinah” became a major concept for the work of God among his people. VanGemeren (*ISBE* 4:467) tells us, “Related designations of the Shekinah are ‘the Word’ (*mēmra*), ‘the Spirit,’ ‘the Glory,’ ‘the Light,’ and ‘the wings of the Shekinah.’”

In the NT this is seen especially in John 1:14, where the incarnate Word is defined as “God tabernacled (ἐσκήνωσεν) among us.” In Jesus the Shekinah became incarnate. The primary concept of Shekinah is twofold: the Shekinah glory of God (Rom. 9:23; 2 Cor. 3:17–18; 1 Pet. 4:13–14), and the idea of God dwelling among his people (2 Cor. 12:9). In Revelation the noun and verb occur seven times. The primary concept is that of God “dwelling” with his people, as in 21:3, where verb and noun occur together: “Now the *dwelling* of God is with his people, and he will *live* with them.” Another provocative place they occur together is in 13:6: the beast “opened his mouth to blaspheme God, and to slander his name and his *dwelling place* and those who *live* in heaven.” Unlike the verb for the earth-dweller (the more common κατοικούντων), the phrase for the heaven-dweller utilizes σκηνοῦντας, which has a more religious connotation of “dwelling with God” (see 12:12). Therefore the meaning here in 7:15 is that in eternity the saints will literally experience the Shekinah presence of God. In 21:3, 15–18 the New Jerusalem is depicted as a Holy of Holies, so in that sense the people of God will spend eternity in a heavenly Holy of Holies as God dwells among them. Yet there is even more meaning than this, for we are told God “spreads his tent” ἐπ’ αὐτούς, and the idea of God’s Shekinah being placed “over” his people signifies protection and comfort. They will never again fear any harm or misfortune (7:16). Beale (1999: 440–41) argues for a special connection with Ezek. 37:26–28, where God says, “I will establish my sanctuary in the midst of them forever, and my tabernacle will be over them,” with the result that “the nations will

recognize that I am the LORD who sanctifies Israel” (cf. Rev. 21:3, 4 where Ezek. 37 is again utilized). Thus the prophecy is fulfilled in the church as the true Israel.

(ii) Removal of All Suffering (7:16)

This next section (7:16–17) is in many ways a midrashic expansion of the promise in Isa. 49:10 given to the exiles returning to Israel from Babylon: “They will never hunger nor thirst, nor will the desert heat of the sun beat upon them. He who has compassion on them will guide them and lead them beside springs of water.” First, all bodily deprivation will be removed. The wording, οὐ πεινάσουσιν ἔτι οὐδὲ διψήσουσιν ἔτι (*ou peinasousin eti oude dipsēsousin eti*, they will not hunger again or thirst again), parallels the LXX of Isa. 49:10a apart from the double addition of ἔτι, which strengthens the idea of “never again.”^[20] Hunger and thirst are often in the OT a sign of judgment upon Israel for turning against God (Deut. 28:47–48; Lam. 4:4; 5:10; Isa. 8:21). The purpose is to make God’s people aware of a much deeper need for God’s spiritual refreshment. The food metaphor in Scripture speaks not just of physical needs but of all life’s needs, as hinted at in Isa. 49:10 above and stated openly in Isa. 55:1, 3, “Come all you who are thirsty, come to the waters . . . hear me, that your soul may live.” In this same combined sense Jesus said, “Blessed are you who will hunger now, for you will be satisfied” (Luke 6:21; cf. Matt. 5:6). The hungry are blessed because they rely entirely on God. Hunger and thirst are virtually expected for those who would serve God completely (1 Cor. 4:11–13; 2 Cor. 11:27), but all deprivations of life suffered for Christ simply demonstrate “the all-surpassing power . . . from God” (2 Cor. 4:7; cf. 6:7; 13:4). In Rev. 7:16 all who make such sacrifices are guaranteed their final reward, as God turns hunger into eternal bliss, and the Lamb assuages their thirst forever (7:17).

Not only will their physical needs be met, but no external deprivation will ever again harm them. Again borrowing from Isa. 49:10, the elder continues, οὐδὲ μὴ πέσῃ^[21] ἐπ’ αὐτοὺς ὁ ἥλιος οὐδὲ πᾶν καῦμα (*oude mē pesē ep’ autous ho hēlios oude pan kauma*, nor will the sun ever beat down on them, nor any burning heat). In the Mediterranean climate, the sun was an apt image for natural impediments. In the Jewish world this was even more so, for the burning Sinai desert would certainly feature the “sun beating down” on them. The darkening of the sun was a frequent apocalyptic motif (e.g., Isa. 13:10; Ezek. 32:7; cf. Rev. 6:12), but so was the idea of the sun’s burning heat (Ps. 121:6), although their number is surprisingly few given the aptness of the image. When we add the image of καῦμα, the number increases somewhat. The term refers to the sun’s “scorching heat,” used in divine judgment of Jehoiakim in Jer. 36:30 and of affliction in Job 30:30 and Jer. 17:8. In the Apocalypse the verb and noun cognates signify judgment in 16:8, 9 (the sun “scorching” people with “intense heat”). Many believe that καῦμα here refers to the sirocco, the hot wind off the Judean desert. There is too little evidence for such, however, and the imagery of the sun predominates here and wherever else the term is used in Scripture. The point here is that God will deliver his followers of all the suffering they have gone through for his sake.

(iii) Actions of the Lamb and God on Their Behalf (7:17)

The reason for the effects of verses 15–16 (ὅτι, *hoti*, because) is seen in the work of the Lamb and of God on behalf of their followers. This is another verse that is rich in OT themes and NT fulfillment. The first clause juxtaposes images in a similar way as “the lion is a lamb” of 5:5, 6. There is incredible depth in the startling image of “the Lamb is their shepherd.” It is a reversal similar to Jesus the servant becoming Lord of all. In the OT Yahweh is called the “Shepherd of Israel” (Gen.

48:15; 49:24; Ps. 80:1). As Jeremias (TDNT 6:487) states, Yahweh as shepherd goes before his flock (Ps. 68:7), guides it (Ps. 23:3), leads it to pasture (Jer. 50:19) and springs of water (Ps. 23:2; Isa. 40:11), protects it with his staff (Ps. 23:4), gathers the dispersed (Zech. 10:8; Isa. 56:8), and carries them in his bosom (Isa. 40:11). David of course became the shepherd-king. Thus in Ezek. 34:23 (cf. vv. 20–24) God prophesies about a future Davidic ruler who will shepherd Israel, and the people of God will become one people under a single shepherd. Nielsen (1992: 128–29) believes this stems especially from Hos. 5:12–13, which describes God shepherding Israel: “The shepherd fights and he heals. But God is a very special shepherd; he turns himself into a wild beast, a lion, the enemy of the shepherd; he hurts his own flock, but he heals his flock once he has hurt it.”

In other words, this follows the tendency throughout to stretch the tensile power of metaphors by twisting them into their opposite—the lion is a lamb, and the slain lamb becomes the conquering ram (5:5–6) that is filled with wrath (6:16). The lamb then becomes a shepherd. Jesus is the good shepherd who knows his sheep, calls them by name, and lays down his life for them (John 10:3, 11, 14). His mission was to gather “the lost sheep of Israel” (Matt. 15:24; cf. 10:6). In 1 Pet. 2:25 the stray sheep return to “the Shepherd . . . of [their] souls,” and Heb. 13:20 calls Jesus “the great Shepherd of the sheep.” In this passage, however, the emphasis is on the metamorphosis of the Lamb into the Shepherd. Christ can guide and protect his flock because he first was “the slain Lamb” (5:6a) who in his exaltation became the conquering ram (5:6b) and took his place “at the right hand of God” (Ps. 110:1, quoted in Eph. 1:20; Heb. 1:3; etc.). Here the Lamb is found ἀνὰ μέσον τοῦ θρόνου (*ana meson tou thronou*, at the center of the throne).[22] This makes more specific the emphasis in 4:2 and 5:6, where the Lamb joins God “in the midst of/near (ἐν μέσῳ) the throne.” It is not just the Messiah but the very God-man who shepherds the flock of God in eternity (see Mark 12:35–38, where Jesus said that as Lord, he was more than “the son of David”).[23]

As the divine Shepherd, Jesus ὁδηγήσει αὐτοὺς ἐπὶ ζωῆς πηγὰς ὑδάτων (*hodēgēsei autous epi zōēs pēgas hydatōn*, will guide them to springs of living water). In the LXX ὁδηγέω is often used of God “leading” his flock, for instance in the exodus (Exod. 13:17; 15:13) and especially in the pillar of fire and cloud (Deut. 1:33). In Ps. 31:3 and 67:4 God becomes the “guide” of the faithful and of the nations. Often in the Psalms the people of God pray for guidance (Ps. 5:8; 27:11; 119:35), and this guidance is connected with God’s shepherding activity in Ps. 78:72; 80:1. In the NT we see the Spirit leading us “to all truth” (John 16:13), and here we see the Shepherd “leading” the flock “to springs of living water.” There is an interesting syntactical arrangement in which ζωῆς is placed first for emphasis and then made singular while “springs of water” is plural. The result is that “life” becomes the real thrust of the phrase, and “springs of water” becomes a symbol of that “life.” The water theme is quite frequent in John’s Gospel (e.g., 3:5; 4:10, 13–14; 7:38–39; 19:34) as a symbol of eternal life and the divine revelation that comes through the Spirit (see Belleville 1980: 125–41). Here that emphasis is continued. In Ps. 23:2; 36:8; 46:4, and especially in Ezek. 34:10–16, Yahweh as the Shepherd of Israel guides his flock to green pastures and pleasant waters. “Springs of water” in the Holy Land were indeed the source of life in that semiarid part of the world. Therefore, the Shepherd-Lamb here leads his people to “life” in all its fullness.

Finally, God “will wipe away every tear.” Some have interpreted this as tears of sorrow for sin and mistakes in this life. Both here and in 21:4 where this is mentioned, however, the tears are most likely tears of suffering, continuing the theme of persecution and martyrdom from 6:9–11 and 7:9–12. This may well be an echo of Isa. 25:8, which promises that Yahweh will “swallow up death forever” and that “the Sovereign LORD will wipe away the tears from all faces.” The verb ἐξαλείψει (*exaleipsei*, will wipe away) is a very strong verb that also has the idea of “destroy” or

“obliterate.” All earthly pain and sorrow will be removed forever by God (see also Isa. 35:10; 51:1; 65:19).

Summary and Contextualization

The reward for the perseverance of 7:1–8 is seen in 7:9–17. Again, this pictures the “great multitude” of the saints in eternity, when they have faithfully come through the pressures and persecution and stand before the throne of God and the Lamb (7:9). At the outset, we see the emphasis on the successful mission of the church in 7:9a, part of the theme on the conversion of the nations in this book (e.g., 5:9; 11:13 = 14:6–7; 21:24, 26). People have come from every nation on the earth to rejoice in God’s salvation. The promise here is that all the saints will stand before him wearing the white robes of victory and purity, waving palm branches in celebration of the “victory/deliverance” God and the Lamb have brought about for their followers (7:10). What an occasion that will be! It makes all the present sacrifices worthwhile.

When we stand before the great white throne with the living creatures, elders, and angels surrounding it (7:11 = chaps. 4, 5) and see all the angels of heaven rejoicing with us and praising God for what he has done for us (7:11), it will be a scene beyond anything we can imagine. How can anyone read this passage without a sense of worship and overwhelming awe? How can any Christian meditate on it without reaffirming his or her commitment to put the Lord first in everything? Can any earthly achievement begin to compare with this scene? Those who sacrifice everything and compromise their ethics to walk the corridors of power in Washington or in corporate headquarters around the world need to look at this passage again. Is it worth it to “gain the whole world and lose your own soul” (Mark 8:36)?

As believers go through difficult times, general trials as well as specific persecution (and note all the articles even in secular papers and magazines on the persecution of Christians worldwide), it is good to keep in mind the promised results of 7:14–17. Our salvation is assured not because of who we are but because of “the blood of Christ.” Because we are the children of God and have been faithful in the days of trial (inherent in “washed their robes”; see 22:14), God and the Lamb will reward us. Here we must realize that what is being described is not the partial fulfillment of “God with us” in the present, nor just the earthly rewards of the millennial kingdom, but the eternal rewards of our future heavenly existence. The church is “sealed” on earth (7:1–8) before the time of tribulation, and it is rewarded in heaven (7:9–17) after the time of tribulation. The reward is threefold. First, we will be privileged to stand before the throne in worship continually throughout eternity (worship is the major activity in 21:1–22:5). This culminates all the hopes and yearnings of the people of God from Genesis to Revelation. The God whose Shekinah dwelt among his people in the pillar and cloud but especially in the Holy of Holies will now “dwell” (21:3) with us literally and physically for eternity. Second, all earthly sufferings and sorrows will be taken away once and for all. Both internal (hunger and thirst) and external (scorching heat) deprivations will be removed, and we will experience bliss and fulfillment forever. Third, the Lamb will become our Shepherd, leading us to the life-giving springs, and God will wipe away all our tears of suffering. The purpose of this section is to encourage every believer to persevere in this life, for God will make up to us all that we have suffered. It is strange that many Christians will sacrifice and struggle in their earthly jobs, working always for future financial rewards and security, yet they will sacrifice little or nothing for their final eternal rewards. Why give everything for earthly “blessings” that will last only a

short time and surrender heavenly blessings that will last for eternity? As Jesus said in Matt. 6:19–24, seek heavenly treasures, not earthly.

Additional Notes

7:9. ἸΟΪΚΕΣ; There is disagreement as to whether the background is the Feast of Dedication (Sweet 1979: 152) or the Feast of Tabernacles (Thomas, Aune, Beale). Palm branches were used at both, so the question is which feast parallels verses 9–17 the most closely. At Dedication, the palm branches helped celebrate the liberating and rededication of the temple after the great sacrilege by the Greeks (and especially by Antiochus Epiphanes; cf. 1 Macc. 4:54–59; 13:51; 2 Macc. 10:6–7). If this were the background, the palm branches would signify the defeat of the Antichrist and the joy of the temple in heaven (see Rev. 7:15). At Tabernacles, palm branches were used in an exodus motif to erect tents that symbolized the sojourn in the wilderness. This would fit the idea of God “tabernacling” over his people (v. 15) and the emphasis on “living water” in 7:17 (= the water ceremony of Tabernacles; cf. John 7:37–39). However, such a debate is probably a case of overexegesis. The palm branches are a symbol of messianic victory and of joy in the participation of the people of God in that victory, so parallels with both the victory over the armies of Egypt and the Maccabean victory over the Syrians are valid. However, this is a general symbol rather than pointing to any one particular feast.

7:9–17. The verbs in this section are very diverse, combining present, future, aorist, and perfect tenses. There is a great debate as to the temporal orientation of the passage, with some contending for a preterist interpretation (applying to the members of the seven churches), others to a millennial setting, still others to the time just before eternity is ushered in, and finally many to eternity itself. In 7:9 there is the past tense “could not be numbered” followed by a present thrust in “standing . . . wearing” and “crying out” in 7:10. In 7:11 there are past tenses, “stood” and “fell.” In 7:13–14 the passage begins with aorist verbs (“answered” and “said”) but switches to present verbs for identifying the people in white robes, and the participle “coming” is also present tense. However, the verbs “washed” and “made white” return to the aorist tense. In 7:15 the verbs for the saints’ presence before the throne and their worship are present tense, but “will spread” is future tense. The verbs in 7:16–17 are also future tense. This movement between past, present, and future is a feature of apocalyptic discourse, which tends to distort temporal relationships. It is best on the basis of context to see this section as a description of the church triumphant in heaven (see introduction to vv. 9–17) rather than the church on earth in John’s day or in the millennium.

7:14. Bauckham (1993b: 226–29) provides an extensive argument for interpreting “washed their garments and made them white in the blood of the lamb” not as a redemptive image but as a depiction of “victory in a holy war.” He finds background in the Torah passages that require the washing of garments as a purification ritual after shedding blood (Num. 31:19–20; cf. 1QM 14.2–3), and then sees the “blood of the lamb” as a “decisive reinterpretation of the holy war motif” via martyrdom as drawn from Dan. 11:35; 12:10. In this way martyrdom becomes a purifying act, as the saints purify themselves via martyrdom in the “great tribulation.” In other words, “the martyrs share in the Lamb’s victory by means of a sacrificial death like his” (228). This impressive argument, however, fails to account for the links with 1:5b; 5:9; 12:11. The “blood” imagery seems always to refer to the Lamb’s victory on the cross, not to our victory via martyrdom.

c. Seventh Seal (8:1)

Both the seal and trumpet judgments are interrupted by interludes (7:1–17; 10:1–11:13) that separate the sixth and seventh of each. One of the reasons for this is to show how the seventh judgment in each series is intimately related to the plague judgments that follow. With the opening of the seventh seal, the scroll (5:1–8a) is now open, and the events that inaugurate eternity are ready to begin. The silence is a hushed expectancy for the inauguration of these final events.

Exegesis and Exposition

¹And when the seventh seal was opened, there was silence in heaven for about half an hour.

As with the first six seals, the Lamb who was “worthy” to open the seals (5:2, 5, 12) now “opened the seventh seal,” utilizing the same phrase used to introduce the first six seals (apart from ὅταν [*hotan*, when] used for ὅτε [*hote*, when], but these are synonyms).^[1] Following the imagery of the scroll sealed with seven seals in 5:1, the scroll containing the final events of human history and the plan for the eschaton is now apparently ready to be opened. Yet as the seal is opened, a rather surprising event happens. Instead of angelic action as in all the rest of the seals, trumpets, and bowls, there is a dramatic σιγή (*sigē*, silence) that lasts ὥς ἡμιώριον (*hōs hēmiōrion*, about^[2] a half hour). The reason for this silence has been much discussed, with several differing interpretations offered: (1) silence in heaven so the prayers of God’s people (8:3–5) may be heard (R. Charles, Caird, Bauckham); (2) a temporary cessation of revelation, with the silence in heaven rather than on earth (Swete); (3) a dramatic pause signifying the awe and dread as the heavenly hosts await the coming events (Beckwith, Mounce, Thomas, Giesen); (4) repeating the primeval silence that greeted the first creation at this final re-creation of the world (Rissi, Roloff, Sweet); (5) an indication that the seal visions are now complete (Krodel 1989: 189); (6) a liturgical silence that in both Greco-Roman and Jewish ritual provides a prelude to prayer (Malina, Aune); (7) the silence of the condemned (from the sixth seal), as they await divine judgment (cf. Isa. 47:5; Amos 8:2–3; 2 Esdr. [4 Ezra] 6:39; 7:30; 2 Bar. 3.7; so Prigent, Beale); (8) an intense expectation of God’s intervention, forming a brief interruption between the first cycle (the seals, dealing with promise) and the other two cycles (the action that results; so Biguzzi in Lambrecht 1998: 204).

As is so often the case, these are not mutually exclusive. It is difficult to deny that it is a dramatic pause, but that hardly exhausts its meaning. It also completes the seal visions, but again has more meaning than this. It liturgically prepares for the incense and prayer in 7:3–5, as it did in the Jewish synagogue service, but that too provides only part of its purpose here. The silence at creation in Gen. 1:2–3 is at best implicit and is not found in the text itself, but later Jewish speculation did stress creation’s primeval silence (2 Esdr. [4 Ezra] 6:39; 7:10) as a prelude to the final silence preceding the eschaton (2 Esdr. [4 Ezra] 7:30, where it is a seven-day silence). Thus this is at least a valid possibility but cannot be finally proven. The OT writers take “silence” as an anticipation of God’s imminent action (Exod. 14:14; 1 Sam. 12:16), as the natural response to God’s omnipotence (Isa. 41:1; Hab. 2:20), or as a fearsome awe in light of his coming judgment (Zeph. 1:7; Zech. 2:13; so Prigent 1981: 130). This provides a more natural background for the silence here. All in heaven are in breathless anticipation as they await God’s final actions in bringing history to a close, and the

sinners are silent in the face of imminent judgment. The scroll is being opened, and they cannot wait for the final events to unfold. Wick (1998: 512–13) adds a viable theory: Since the priestly sacrifices were made in silence, this could explain the silence here. This silence contrasts with the noise of the worship in chapter 7 and of the trumpets in 8:6–7. But why only here in the book? It is because 8:1–6 provides an actual sacrifice with the incense and the prayers of the martyrs. This is an interesting, even likely, hypothesis.

Within this hypothesis the view of R. Charles (1920: 1.223–24) and Bauckham (1993b: 70–71) also makes a lot of sense in this context. Verse 1 is at the same time the conclusion of the seal judgments (6:1–8:1) and a transition to the introduction to the trumpet judgments (8:2–5). This is seen in the καὶ εἶδον (*kaieidon*, and I saw) that introduces 7:2. In 6:2, 5, 8; and 7:2 it introduces minor rather than major breaks and seems to be more of a transition to another aspect of the same vision rather than introducing an entirely new vision. Therefore there seems to be a close connection between 8:1 and 8:2–5. As I have already stated, Revelation has no neat organizational plan. While at the macrolevel it is best to think of 6:1–8:1 as one unit and 8:2–9:21 as another, at the microlevel 8:1–5 is interconnected. Thus the actions of the angel carrying the golden censer with the prayers of the saints to God (8:2–4) are indeed part of the silence in heaven.^[3] Bauckham (1993b: 70–83, building on R. Charles) points to the Jewish tradition that the angels sing at night but are silent during the day so that God can hear the prayers of his people (*b. Hag.* 12b; cf. *Gen. Rab.* 65.21; *Tg. Cant.* 1.1). This tradition believed that when God’s people praised him or when incense was offered in the temple, the hosts of heaven were silent. In light of the centrality of incense and the prayers of the saints in 8:3–4, this suggestion makes sense, though it is not quite as viable as the sacrificial suggestion above. In short, there are two primary reasons for this dramatic pause: the hushed expectancy of God’s judgment about to unfold, and the liturgical silence of heaven in light of the incense and the prayers of the saints in 5:8; 6:9–11; and 7:3–4.

Summary and Contextualization

In the Lord’s Prayer (Matt. 6:10), Christ enjoined his disciples to pray “Your kingdom come.” Revelation 8:1 tells us that all of heaven participates in that prayer, longing for the final judgments to usher in God’s eternal kingdom. As in the “hallelujah choruses” of 19:1–8, these judgments are also the cause of worship. The thought of God’s final victory over the forces of evil should produce in us both anticipation and prayer.

3. Seven Trumpets (8:2–11:19)

The content of the scroll is now unveiled in the trumpets and bowls. The trumpet judgments form the middle of the three septets but are more closely related in style and substance to the bowl judgments. The seals are preliminary judgments that explore the depravity of humankind and demonstrate the necessity of judgment. The saints are sealed from the wrath of God and the judgments themselves but face the wrath of the earth-dwellers. The silence in heaven is an expectant hush awaiting the action of God, but that is not to be just an outpouring of wrath but God's answer to the imprecatory prayers of the saints (6:9–11 recapitulated in 8:3–4). Thus there is worship (the golden censer with incense) behind the justice.

Moreover, it is clear that the trumpets are directed at the idolatry so prevalent in John's day (and in our day, though in different guise). The first four trumpets recapitulate the Egyptian plagues (Exod. 7–10), which themselves were addressed to the Egyptian gods. The plagues had a threefold purpose: to prove the sovereign presence and power of Yahweh, to show the powerlessness of the Egyptian gods, and to show Pharaoh (a god to the Egyptians) that he could not win. Primarily, the plagues were a cosmic struggle between Yahweh and the powers behind Egypt (see the excellent summary by Hoffmeier, *NIDOTTE* 4:1056–58). All these elements are present in the trumpets and bowls, except the third element has been transformed into showing the earth-dwellers that Satan cannot win. Michaels (1997: 122) notes that the plague imagery has been transformed by adding elements from Sinai. In the first trumpet it is "fire," not hail or blood, that does the damage. In the third trumpet the waters turn "bitter," not bloody, and reverse the miracle of Marah (Exod. 15:23). In the fourth trumpet, the dimming of the sun, moon, and stars is not total but might be closer to Sinai than the total darkness of the plague. In short, there is not only plague imagery but also Sinai themes in this passage.

Like the seals, the trumpet judgments take the form of 4 + 2 + 1, with an extensive interlude (10:1–11:13) between the sixth and seventh trumpets. Yet the last three are also linked closely together by the "woe" sayings (8:13; 9:12; 11:14). Moreover, in the fifth and sixth trumpets another theme is introduced, that of the call to repentance. In this way the trumpets participate in the mission to the world in the book and provide both a final proof of God's power over the earthly gods and a final chance to repent. Court (1979: 79) states that the trumpet plagues "are interpreted most satisfactorily in the same context as the prophetic use of the plague tradition, with its emphasis on a call to repentance." Friedrich (*TDNT* 7:87) adds, "The aim of God in sending the plagues is that men should be converted from idolatry. They are meant to drive men to repentance before it is too late. But men will not be warned." In 9:20–21 this call is rejected, continuing the stress on total depravity, but in 11:13 (the interlude between the sixth and seventh trumpets) there seem to be a few who respond and "give glory to God" (cf. 14:7).

Yet the relationship between the trumpets and the bowls is a complex one. While the order of the first four of each is very similar (judgments on the earth, the oceanic waters, the inland waters, and the heavenly bodies), the actual judgments themselves do not tightly correspond. I will build on Roloff's excellent parallel (1993: 103–4):

Trumpet Cycle

Bowl Cycle

1. Hail and fire (= seventh plague), with a third of the vegetation burnt

1. Painful sores (= sixth plague), with all the beast's followers affected

2. Ocean turned to blood (= first plague), with a third of fish and ships destroyed	2. Ocean turned to blood (= first plague), with all sea creatures killed
3. Inland waters turned bitter (= first plague) with many deaths	3. Inland waters become blood (= first plague) with people having to drink blood
4. Sun, moon, and stars darkened (= ninth plague), with the sky darkened for a third of the day and night	4. The sun scorches people (no plague), with intense pain from the burns

The similarities are evident, beginning with the use of the Egyptian plagues and the order of the natural elements affected. Also, there is a uniform intensification in which the trumpets affect a third of the earth and the bowls the whole earth. However, the differences are also interesting and obvious from the chart. Only the second and third agree in the type of judgment, but even there differences abound, as the second trumpet begins with “a huge mountain” falling in the sea, while the second bowl is simply poured into the sea; and the third trumpet has a blazing star falling into the waters, while the third bowl again is simply poured into the inland waters. Roloff (1993: 105) believes that this is due to differing traditions used by John and his own literary artistry, but it seems more likely that the visions themselves contained these differences and that each is due to the different apocalyptic images sought in the various instances. In short, total uniformity would defeat the purpose of these judgments, for each one seeks to produce an indelible image of God’s sovereign power in the mind, and each one has a message in and of itself. Yet they also form a distinct unity focusing on the sovereign power of God. As Krodel (1989: 192) says, “All three septets reveal that catastrophes are not proofs of God’s absence. On the contrary, they are signs of his coming in judgment and in salvation.”

a. Introduction to Trumpet Judgments (8:2–6)

As some have noted (Talbert 1994: 38), there is a chiastic pattern in verses 2–6:

- A The seven angels are given trumpets
- B Another angel carries the censers with the prayers of the saints to God
- B' The angel hurls the censer with fire to the earth
- A' The seven angels prepare to sound the trumpets

Talbert (1994: 38) notes that in Jewish apocalyptic two metaphors of heaven predominate, the throne room and the heavenly temple with its altar. Both are utilized in Revelation, and both are combined in this scene, with the altar before the throne (8:3). Moreover, worship throughout this book produces judgment as well as joy. This is because God is characterized by both love and justice, and these are not separate but interdependent aspects of his being. Therefore judgment against God's enemies occasions the same worship as does the vindication and salvation of his people. Here the prayers of the saints for justice are brought before God and produce the judgments. God assures his people that he does hear their prayers and act on them, albeit in his own time, not theirs (6:11).

- i. Seven angels are given trumpets (8:2)
- ii. The angel with the golden censer (8:3–4)
- iii. Heavenly response to prayers (8:5)
- iv. Preparation to sound the trumpets (8:6)

Exegesis and Exposition

²And I saw the seven angels who stand before God, and he gave them seven trumpets. ³And another angel came and stood at the altar, having a golden censer, and God gave him much incense to offer on behalf of the prayers of all the saints on the golden altar before the throne. ⁴And the smoke of the incense with the prayers of the saints ascended from the hand of the angel to the presence of God. ⁵And the angel took the censer, filled it with fire from the altar, and threw it to the earth, and there came peals of thunder, the roar of the storm, flashes of lightning, and an earthquake. ⁶And the seven angels who had the seven trumpets prepared to sound them.

i. Seven Angels are Given Trumpets (8:2)

Both the trumpets and bowls are introduced by John's vision of τοὺς ἑπτὰ ἀγγέλους (*tous hepta angelous*, the seven angels), with the presence of the article pointing to a specific group, perhaps the seven before the throne in 1:4 (if those are angels) or the angels connected to the seven churches in chapters 2–3. However, when we note the following οἱ ἐνώπιον τοῦ θεοῦ ἑστήκασιν (*hoi enōpion tou theou hestēkasin*, who stand^[1] before the throne), it is likely that these are the seven archangels of apocalyptic tradition who present the prayers of the saints before the throne (Tob. 12:15) and who are named in 1 Enoch 20.2–8 (Uriel, Raphael, Raguel, Michael, Saraqa'el, Gabriel, and Remiel).^[2] We are once more in the throne room of chapter 4, and “the seven angels before the throne” are linked to the circles of living creatures, elders, and angels there.

These angels are given^[3] ἑπτὰ σάλπιγγες (*hepta salpinges*, seven trumpets), which turn them

into royal heralds of the actions of the King of kings. Trumpets were used not only in time of war^[4] (1 Sam. 13:3; Jer. 51:27) but also at the dedication of the temple (2 Chron. 5:12), at the enthronement of the king (1 Kings 1:34, 39), and in enthronement psalms at the worship of Yahweh (Ps. 98:6). Trumpets were blown before the burnt offering (Num. 10:10), at feasts (Lev. 23:24; 25:9), to call the nation to repentance in time of disaster (Isa. 58:1; Jer. 4:5), and at the bringing up of the ark (2 Sam. 6:15). In Jewish life there were at least twenty-one blasts of the trumpet daily in the temple, and on feast days as many as forty-eight (*m. Sukk.* 5.5). Seven priests blew trumpets at the fall of Jericho (Josh. 6:4, 8),^[5] at the bringing of the ark to Jerusalem (1 Chron. 15:24), and at the dedication of the wall of Jerusalem (Neh. 12:41). In a provocative parallel, at the appearance of Yahweh before Israel on Mount Sinai, we are told in Exod. 19:16, “On the morning of the third day there was thunder and lightning, with thick cloud over the mountain, and a very loud trumpet blast” (see also Exod. 19:19). It is possible that this is the basis of the trumpet announcing the day of Yahweh (Isa. 27:13; Joel 2:1; Zeph. 1:16; Zech. 9:14). In Jewish apocalyptic the trumpet continued to be the instrument announcing eschatological judgment (2 Esdr. [4 Ezra] 6:23; Sib. Or. 4.173–74; Apoc. Abr. 31). This continued in the NT period, as trumpets announce the eschaton in Matt. 24:31; 1 Cor. 15:52; 1 Thess. 4:16. In Revelation trumpets are used as symbols of eschatological promise (1:10; 4:1) as well as harbingers of judgment (all the other trumpet blasts occur in connection to the seven judgments here).

ii. The Angel with the Golden Censer (8:3–4)

“Another angel” appears, distinct from the seven, to continue preparations for the outpouring of divine judgment. As in other instances of angelic (or nonangelic) displays (e.g., the rider on the white horse of 6:2 or the mighty angel robed in a cloud of 10:1), some believe this is Christ (Seiss, Walvoord, Beale) due to his mediatorial work in bringing the prayers to God. However, we have already seen the priestly function of angels emphasized in this book (e.g., 4:8–11; 5:8–14; 7:11–12), and this is another such instance.^[6] The priestly carrying of the golden censer parallels the priestly work of the elders in 5:8 who held “golden bowls of incense, which are the prayers of the saints.” This angel ἤλθεν καὶ ἐστάθη ἐπὶ τοῦ θυσιαστηρίου (*ēlthen kai estathē epì tou thysiastēriou*, came and stood^[7] at^[8] the altar). This is undoubtedly the same as the “golden altar” later in the verse, for as R. Charles points out (1920: 1.227), there is no evidence of two altars in heaven anywhere in ancient Jewish literature. Some (Beckwith 1919: 552; Ladd 1972: 125–26) picture the angel going to the altar of burnt offering (8:3a), getting coals that are then offered on the altar of incense (8:3b), and finally returning to the altar of burnt offering to hurl fire down to earth (8:5). As others point out (Thomas 1995: 8–9; Beale 1999: 454–55), however, this does not fit the contextual flow from the incense of 8:4 to the altar of 8:5. There is no indication of such movement in the text (see also the discussion in 6:9). In the apocalyptic vision of this book, the altar in heaven blends together the altar of burnt offering (primary in 6:9) and the altar of incense (primary here in 8:3–5). The altar of incense (the only one of the two that was a “golden altar”) stood just before the veil in the Holy Place (Exod. 40:26, though Heb. 9:4 theologically places it just inside the Holy of Holies), and priests daily offered incense on it.

We next see this angel “having a golden censer.” Λιβανωτός (*libanōtos*, censer) was used in the LXX for the incense itself (e.g., 1 Chron. 9:29)^[9] but here refers to the censer that contains the incense. This was an open-topped pan made of bronze (in the tabernacle, Exod. 27:3) or gold (in Solomon’s temple, 1 Kings 7:50) used to carry live coals from the altar of burnt offering for making sacrifices (Lev. 16:12), and often incense would be placed on these coals in the censers and offered

before the Lord (Num. 16:6–7). It was a zealously guarded prerogative of the Aaronic priesthood (Num. 16:17–18; see Naudé, *NIDOTTE* 2:924), and the fact that an angel carries this censer continues the priestly function of angels in this book. Along with the censer God gives [10] the angel **θυμιάματα πολλά** (*thymiamata polla*, much incense). In the OT “incense” referred to a special combination of three aromatic spices: resin droplets and galbanum gum (taken from shrubs or trees) mingled with mollusk scent (from the mollusk shellfish), then mixed with an equal amount of frankincense (also a gum resin). This was used to make “a fragrant blend of incense” that had salt added to it (for reasons that are unknown but perhaps for incendiary purposes) and then was ground to powder and placed “in front of the Testimony in the Tent of Meeting,” probably referring to the altar of incense (Exod. 30:34–38). Incense stood both for protection of the priest and the people (Lev. 16:13; Num. 16:47–48) and for the people’s prayers as they ascend to God (Ps. 141:2). [11]

The angel has the incense **ἵνα δώσει** [12] **ταῖς προσευχαῖς τῶν ἁγίων πάντων** (*hina dōsei taῖs proseuchais tōn hagion pantōn*, so that he might offer [it] with all the prayers of the saints). There are two options here. Either the incense and prayers are separate (incense mingled “with the prayers of the saints,” dative of accompaniment) or they are identical (the incense offered “consisting of the prayers of the saints,” a Semitic use of the dative for definition). Some (Bruce 1986: 1610; Mounce 1998: 174) argue for identity on the basis of 5:8, where the elders hold “golden bowls of incense, which are the prayers of the saints.” That is certainly viable, since in the OT incense often stood for prayers. The imagery here is somewhat different, however, and it is more likely that the incense bore the prayers of the saints up to God. The datives here and in 8:4 are probably datives of advantage (BDF §188.1), meaning that the incense ascended “on behalf of” the prayers of God’s people.

Aune (1998a: 513) relates the three ways incense was offered in ancient Israel: (1) it was burned with the grain offering (Lev. 2:1, 15) and perhaps with the burnt offering. (2) “Outer” incense was offered in a long-handled censer (Lev. 10:1; Num. 16:6) and not placed on the altar but burned by live coals from the altar (Lev. 16:12). (3) “Inner” incense was offered on the golden incense altar as part of the morning and evening offerings of a lamb (Exod. 30:7–9); coals from the brazen altar were taken to the incense altar, and the incense was sprinkled on them. This third type is intended here. The prayers here most likely refer specifically to the imprecatory prayers for vengeance and justice in Rev. 6:9–11, although the presence of “all the saints” here specifically may refer to all prayers in general. Most likely, the language emphasizes the imprecatory prayers within the general category of all the prayers of the saints. “All the saints” refers to the “great multitude” of 7:9, and within that category the martyrs of 6:9–11 are especially highlighted. As stated above, one of the themes of the seals, trumpets, and bowls is that the outpouring of God’s judgment is his response to the prayers of the saints. Here we see God accepting those prayers as a “sweet-smelling savor” (the meaning of the imagery of incense here). The mention of the throne of God stresses God’s sovereignty and power, thus leading naturally into the judgment theme of 8:5.

As the angel offers the incense, **ἀνέβη ὁ καπνός** (*anebē ho kapnos*, the smoke ascended). The “smoke of the incense” in the OT was the cloud of smoke that filled the Holy Place and stood for the pleasing aroma of the sacrifices to God (Exod. 29:18; Lev. 1:9; Num. 18:17). It is used also in Eph. 5:2, looking at Christ’s death “as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.” In Phil. 4:18 Paul called the gifts of the Philippian church “a fragrant offering, an acceptable sacrifice, pleasing to God.” The idea of smoke combines the smoke of the sacrifice itself as it is consumed on the altar and the smoke of the incense that also ascends to God as “a fragrant aroma.” There is an interesting

contrast between the “smoke” of the martyrs’ prayer for vengeance here and the “smoke” of 14:11 and 19:3 that depicts the smoke of the torment of the evildoers that “rises forever and ever.” In the theology of this book, the smoke of the latter is God’s response to the smoke of the former. There is also an implied contrast with 9:2, where “smoke ascended [nearly identical wording] from the abyss like a giant furnace.” Here the smoke is worship; there it is judgment.

Once more this incense carries (the same dative of advantage as in 8:3) “the prayers of the saints” upward to God. They ascend to the very presence of God. There is a strong spatial emphasis as the smoke and the prayers proceed “from the hand of the angel” and are presented “before God.” This is unusual, for in the OT the cloud of smoke is never portrayed as coming “from the hand of” the priest, nor is it seen as being presented “before God.” This is a graphic picture of the ascension of the prayers of the martyrs to God. All of heaven is involved in making certain that God receives these cries for justice. Beale (1999: 455–56) goes further, arguing that since angels always function in the book as divine messengers, that the prayers come from “the hand of the angel” means God has *already* accepted their prayers and is in the process of vindicating their sacrifice for him.

iii. Heavenly Response to Prayers (8:5)

God not only heard their prayers (see on 8:1, where one of the reasons of the silence in heaven was for God to hear the prayers of the martyred saints) but responded immediately. Thus the priestly angel becomes an avenging angel. The imagery begins with the Levitical symbolism of 8:3–4 and moves to an apocalyptic motif as the fire of the altar is hurled to the earth and becomes judgment. Obviously on command from God as he received the incense and prayers, the angel took^[13] the censer from which the incense and prayers had ascended and for the second time “filled it with fire from the altar.” Any first-century reader would know (from both pagan and Jewish parallels) that the censer held coals of fire before the incense powder had been placed in it in 8:3. The picture is that the priest-angel returned to the altar (now the altar of burnt offering is again foremost [see discussion in 8:3]) and took a second “fire” from it. The thrust of the first coals was to lift incense and prayers to God, but now the coals become the “fire” of judgment.^[14] The best source for this change of imagery is Ezek. 10:2–7, in which a man clothed in linen (an angel) is told to take coals of fire in his hands from the throne and scatter it on the city, symbolizing a fiery judgment. As Bauckham (1993b: 82) brings out, in Ezekiel this symbolic act is connected both with the sealing of the righteous on the forehead (Ezek. 9:4) and with judgment (Ezek. 1:12–13), which included burning coals, fire, and lightning.

The major thrust is that the fiery judgments that are to ensue in following chapters are God’s response to the cries of his people and his vindication of his followers for all that they have suffered (contra Beale 1999: 457–58, who believes this refers to the last judgment).^[15] The angel ἔβαλεν εἰς τὴν γῆν (*ebalen eis tēn gēn*, threw it to the earth); this is a violent portrayal of an act of judgment. In Ezek. 10:2 the imagery is that of scattering, while here the judgment is “hurled down.” Βάλλω occurs again in verses 7–8, in which both the hail and fire and then the huge mountain are “thrown” down upon the earth.

The divine judgment thrown down to earth is then accompanied by the second storm theophany of the book (note also the shaking of the heavens in 6:12–14, which is similar). The first occurred as part of the throne room vision of 4:5 and established the theme of the sovereignty of God, built on both Sinai (Exod. 19:16, 18) and the chariot vision of Ezekiel (Ezek. 1:13). This is the first of three further occurrences, each one following the seventh of the seals (Rev. 8:5),^[16]

trumpets (11:19), and bowls (16:18). In 4:5 the storm theophany was part of worship, and these others focus on judgment. As we have seen, worship and judgment are interconnected throughout this book. Interestingly, the earthquake is missing in 4:5 but present in the other three contexts. There are two explanations. First, the earthquake is missing in the LXX of Exod. 19:18 but present in the MT, so either would reflect the OT account. As Bauckham (1993b: 203) points out, the earthquake “was widely treated as a major feature of the phenomena at Sinai (cf. also Heb. 12:26).” Second, in the Apocalypse the earthquake is especially part of the judgment motif (see on 6:12) and so is more fitting in the latter three storm theophanies. The word order also differs among the four occurrences. In 4:5, 11:19, and 16:18 the lightning is first, while here in 8:5 the thunder is first. If there is any particular reason, it could be that this verse followed the order of the Exodus imagery (19:16—thunder and lightning) to stress the awesomeness of God. Apart from 4:5, the emphasis of the storm imagery is on the eschaton as God is in process of bringing the history of this world to a close.

iv. Preparation to Sound Trumpets (8:6)

In 8:2 the seven angels are given trumpets, and now in verse 6 they get ready^[17] to sound them, framing the actions of the priestly angel in 8:2–5. Normally when seven priests blew trumpets, they would do so together, but here the angels sound them one at a time, and each is a separate judgment.

Summary and Contextualization

In the introduction to this section (8:2–5) worship and justice are intertwined. The prayers of the saints are those of 6:9–11, a call to God for justice and vengeance on those who took their lives. This is mixed with incense in the golden censer, showing that these prayers are acceptable to God and please him. When they ascend to God, he responds through the angel, as the censer is filled with fire from the heavenly altar and hurled to earth, initiating the trumpet judgments. This tells us that such imprecatory prayers are not only in keeping with his will (see Rom. 12:19) but also have a place in the life of the believer. Such prayers allow us to place our deep hurts before God and know that he will deal justly with those who have mistreated us. Thus we can overcome these deep hurts and love the unlovely (Rom. 12:14–21). In Revelation this becomes true in the ultimate sense. The judgments of the seals, trumpets, and bowls are God’s response to the imprecatory prayers of the martyred saints.

b. First Four Trumpets (8:7–12)

As stated above, these trumpet plagues replicate the Egyptian plagues and address the problem of idolatry (the earthly gods) not only in the Roman Empire but also among the “Christian” cults of the province of Asia (see on 2:2, 6, 14, 20). The purpose is to prove the sovereignty of God and to give a last chance for repentance. With each one another part of this world experiences partial destruction, and each one reproduces the action of 8:5, where the angel fills the censer with fire and “hurls” it to the earth. Here each angel sounds the trumpet (from 8:2 this takes place in heaven), and a judgment is “hurled” (8:7, 8) down to earth. In relation to the seals and bowls, the trumpets have the same 4 + 2 + 1 organization as the seals (the bowls have a 4 + 3 organization): the first four are judgments on the earth; the next two are judgments on the earth-dwellers/kingdom of the beast. An interlude occurs between the sixth and seventh; the seventh symbolizes the eschaton. The trumpet judgments intensify the seals, affecting a third of the earth, and are intensified in turn by the bowls that affect the whole earth.

- i. First trumpet (8:7)
- ii. Second trumpet (8:8–9)
- iii. Third trumpet (8:10–11)
- iv. Fourth trumpet (8:12)

Exegesis and Exposition

⁷The first sounded his trumpet, and hail and fire mixed with blood appeared and were cast down to the earth. A third of the earth was burnt, and a third of the trees were burnt, and all the green grass was burnt. ⁸Then the second angel sounded his trumpet; something like a huge mountain blazing with fire was cast into the sea. A third of the sea became blood, ⁹and a third of the creatures that live in the sea died, and a third of the ships were destroyed. ¹⁰Then the third angel sounded his trumpet, and a huge star blazing like a torch fell from heaven. It fell on a third of the rivers and on the springs of water. ¹¹The name of the star was “Wormwood,” and it made a third of the waters turn bitter, and many people died from the waters that had become bitter. ¹²Then the fourth angel sounded his trumpet, and a third of the sun and a third of the moon and a third of the stars were dealt a blow, so that a third of them were darkened. A third of the day did not shine, nor did a third of the night.

i. First Trumpet (8:7)

As the first angel sounds his trumpet,^[1] “hail and fire mixed with blood” appear in heaven and then are thrown to the earth. This is built on the seventh Egyptian plague (Exod. 9:13–35), in which Moses raised his staff to the sky, and God sent hail mixed with lightning and thunder, the worst storm in the history of Egypt (Exod. 9:18), and it destroyed all vegetation. This is an interesting choice, because the storm theophany in 8:5 has only lightning and thunder, and in 11:19 and 16:21 hail is added to the storm theophany of 4:5; 8:5. In other words, the first trumpet with its hailstorm and fire (= lightning?) becomes virtually a fifth repetition of the storm theophany motif, initiating the other trumpet judgments with a special emphasis on the sovereign, majestic God who is in charge. Hail is a frequent judgment in the OT but, interestingly, in the NT occurs only in Revelation. In Josh. 10:11 God casts “huge hailstones” on the Amorite army, and in Job 38:22–23 God tells Job that he reserves “storehouses of hail” for his enemies. Several psalms celebrate God’s use of hail in the plagues (Ps. 78:47; 105:32–33) and his control of “lightning and hail” (148:8). In

summary, hailstorms are a common element in the judgment theme in the OT.

This goes beyond the seventh Egyptian plague, for “fire” is added to the hail and they are both “mixed with blood.” The imagery of fire and blood probably stems from Joel 2:30–31, “I will show wonders in the heavens and on the earth, blood and fire with billows of smoke. The sun will be turned to darkness and the moon to blood before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the LORD.” This passage was partially fulfilled by Pentecost (Acts 2:19), and here we see its final fulfillment in “the great and dreadful day of Yahweh.” Blood and fire were often combined as symbols of judgment (Isa. 9:5; Ezek. 21:32; 38:22). There is some debate as to what the “blood” signifies. Several (Swete 1911: 110; Beasley-Murray 1978: 157) believe it may allude to the bloodred rain that still today occasionally falls in the Mediterranean area as a result of red dust particles from the Sahara. Others point to the volcanic eruptions in the Aegean islands in the first century, which were said to have turned the sky red. This type of parallel is sometimes dismissed (see Mounce 1998: 178; Krodel 1989: 197) on the grounds that John is drawing all his imagery from OT sources in this section. I am not so certain of this. Throughout the book John blends Jewish and Hellenistic parallels; why not here as well? God is not just giving these visions for John’s Jewish interest but also for the readers in Asia. Therefore, I do not believe we can rule out contemporary parallels for these judgments. In light of the presence of volcanic activity in the next judgment, the Aegean islands may be the better of the two possibilities. However, this certainly goes beyond such parallels. The message would be, “You have seen something like this, but nothing this severe.” Aune (1998a: 519) states that blood raining from the sky was a common motif for divine judgment (Cicero, *De div.* 1.43.98; Pliny, *Nat. Hist.* 2.57.147; Sib. Or. 5.377–80), and this would fit into that category.

As a result, a third of the earth and the trees^[2] and all the grass were “burned up.”^[3] The seventh plague “beat down” the vegetation with hail, but here it is “fire” that destroys. Even the soil was burned. Yet not a third but “all the green grass”^[4] is burnt. There are two questions. First, why is it all and not a third of the grass? It could be a remnant of the seventh plague, but grass is not specified there. Most likely it is for apocalyptic effect: nothing will escape this terrible judgment. Second, what about the contradiction with 9:4, in which the locusts are told, “Do not harm the grass of the earth.” Some say there is time for the grass to grow back between the two judgments (a distinct possibility but not mentioned in the text), and others say it is only “all the grass” in the one-third of the earth that is burnt (but that is not the statement of the text). It is best to see this as another apocalyptic image that is not supposed to be harmonized but taken as is. The cyclical nature of these judgments allows for such seeming contradictions, for the reader is supposed to feel the impact of this image as it is, not compare it to 9:4. Each vision is a self-contained unit in this sense.

Most of us have seen the results of terrible forest fires when even the ground was charred black and all the vegetation was destroyed. Yet none has seen anything like this image. Even the ravaging of large forests in the western United States is only partial. We are supposed to picture one-third of all the great forests of the world (the Amazon, the Congo, Yosemite, Yellowstone) burned down. It is a natural disaster beyond anything imaginable. Think of all the firefighters of the world trying to stem fires thousands of times greater than anything ever known.^[5]

ii. Second Trumpet (8:8–9)

The second trumpet destroys a third of the oceanic waters (θάλασσα, *thalassa*, sea) and parallels the first Egyptian plague (Exod. 7:14–21), in which Moses put his staff into the Nile, and God turned

the water to blood. However, it does not parallel the Egyptian plague closely—there it was simply Moses’ staff, while here it is a frightening object ὡς ὄρος μέγα πυρὶ καϊόμενον (*hōs oros mega pyri kaiomenon*, like a mountain burning with fire). Note that it is not a mountain but “like”^[6] a mountain, which means it pictures a huge mass flying to the earth. There is some material on uprooting mountains in Scripture. Job 28:9 notes people who “lay bare the roots of mountains,” from the ancient view that mountains go down to the very “roots” of the earth. In Judg. 5:5; Jer. 4:24; and Nah. 1:5 the mountains “quake” in God’s presence, and in Ezek. 38:20 and Isa. 41:15 he breaks them in pieces. God devours them with fire (Deut. 32:22; Ps. 83:14). In the NT a close parallel is found in Mark 11:23, in which Jesus says that true faith can say to a mountain, “Go throw yourself into the sea.” As the disciples were at that time on the Mount of Olives, the apocalyptic power of faith there was a powerful analogy. Revelation 8:8 takes the analogy to another level, as the throwing of a mountain “on fire” into the sea is part of the end-time events. In Revelation the mountains are “removed” in 6:14 and then disappear altogether in 16:20.

The major debate here is the source for this image of a “burning mountain” that God “casts into the sea.” There are four possible sources: (1) It could allude to Jer. 51:25, where Yahweh speaks against Babylon, “I am against you, O destroying mountain. . . . I will stretch out my hand against you, roll you off the cliff, and make you a burned-out mountain.” While the imagery is not exact (in Jeremiah the burned-out mountain is Babylon), the context of eschatological judgment is similar. (2) Its origin might be in Jewish apocalyptic, for instance, 1 Enoch 18.13, “And I saw there the seven stars that were like great burning mountains,” which turned out to be fallen angels who were bound in an “empty place” (21.3–4). A closer parallel may be in Sib. Or. 5.158–59, “a great star will come from heaven to the wondrous sea and will burn the deep sea and Babylon itself.” With the combination of the sea and Babylon (see Rev. 17–18), this is a viable parallel. (3) It may stem more from first-century volcanic eruptions, possibly Mount Vesuvius, which erupted in A.D. 79 and buried Pompeii and Herculaneum. I have already noted the volcanic eruptions in the Aegean islands,^[7] so this also is a viable possibility. (4) It might picture a meteorite with the imagery of a burning mountain falling into the sea. The image of the goddess Diana (Artemis) in the great temple at Ephesus (one of the seven wonders of the world) was apparently a meteorite (cf. Acts 19:35), and it was thought that meteors were a sign of direct action on the part of the gods.

Each of these scenarios is possible, and as before there is no necessity to choose only one. Jeremiah and the intertestamental apocalyptic writings could easily be linked via the burning mountain motif, and allusions to contemporary experiences interpreted through the lens of apocalyptic background passages have already occurred often in this book. It is difficult to choose between the volcano and meteorite options, and it may be intended that we not do so. The volcano interpretation would link this with the first plague, and the meteorite interpretation would link this with the third plague. This could well be deliberate, for a number of other parallels link these three with the action of the angel that launched the trumpets in 8:5. All three plagues feature fire, and the angel filled the censer with fire before hurling it to earth (8:5, 7, 8, 10). Moreover, both the first and second plagues center on blood as well (8:7, 8). These parallels are not accidental but rather tie these plagues together as “the great day of their [God and the Lamb] wrath” (6:17). The burning mountain thus provides a transition from the volcanic allusion of the first plague to the meteorite allusion of the third.

When the burning mountain fell into the sea, the results were particularly devastating. Only a people directly dependent on sea traffic and food production could appreciate how terrible this would seem to the original readers. First, one-third of the sea turns to blood.^[8] In the first

Egyptian plague (Exod. 7:17–18, 20–21) the Nile was completely turned to blood and all the fish died. Here not only is a third of the sea turned to blood, but also a third of all sea life^[9] as well as oceangoing ships were destroyed. Today we must picture a third of all the oceanic waters to get the same effect. The sea lanes were called the lifeblood of Rome, because the Romans were so dependent on the sea for both food and commerce (see also Rev. 18:17–19). Thus this is even more devastating than the first plague. It is difficult to imagine such an extensive apocalyptic judgment. Still, it is a partial judgment, allowing time for repentance. If the nations will realize the message and turn from their earthly gods to the one living and true God, there is still time to repent.

iii. Third Trumpet (8:10–11)

In the plague on the inland waters, we have another allusion to the first Egyptian plague, somewhat closer in the sense that the OT plague was upon the Nile River. It is also similar in the type of judgment, but instead of a “huge mountain blazing with fire” we see ἀστὴρ μέγας καιόμενος ὡς λαμπάς (*astēr megas kaiomenos hōs lampas*, a huge star burning like a torch). It is clear that this is a meteorite or falling star blazing through the atmosphere as it falls to earth. In 1:20 I discussed the Jewish view that stars were angels, and indeed some (e.g., Johnson 1981: 492) believe this might be an angel, perhaps the “fallen angel” of 9:1.^[10] There is no evidence that this is an angelic visitation, however, and none of the other plagues has been angelic in nature. Rather, this also is a judgment from nature, a divinely sent disaster. See 6:13 for a discussion of falling stars in biblical writings, where it is always a sign of the eschaton. Here the falling star is “blazing like a torch,” a graphic image that not only depicts a falling meteor but also is a harbinger of the later fiery judgment of the “lake of burning sulfur” (19:20; 20:10, 14–15).

The blazing star falls on a third of the rivers and “springs of water,” a phrase used often in the OT (Lev. 11:36; Ps. 104:10; 107:33) due to the fact that much of Judah’s water stems from natural springs. Water was scarce there, and so springs, both natural and humanmade, were essential. Thus springs were viewed as a source of life, and that is the metaphorical meaning in several places, for instance in the “fountain of life” (Prov. 10:11; 13:14; 14:27) and God as “the spring of living water” (Jer. 2:13; 17:13). Isaiah 35:7 gives an eschatological promise that God would turn “the thirsty ground [into] bubbling springs” (cf. Isa. 41:18; 58:11; Joel 3:18). In Revelation the Lamb leads the saints to “springs of living water” in 7:17, and he gives drink to the thirsty from “the spring of the water of life” in 21:6. Thus its place here may be to heighten the great reversal of water as life to water as death in this judgment. In Exod. 7:21 the first Egyptian plague also turned the water bad, so this is a further replication of that disaster.

Startlingly, this star has a name: ὁ Ἄψινθος^[11] (*ho Apsinthos*, Wormwood). This bitter-tasting shrub (there were many varieties in the region) became a symbol of bitter sorrow (Prov. 5:4, “bitter as wormwood”), of the “bitter poison” of idolatry (Deut. 29:18), and also of judgment and death (Jer. 9:15; 23:15, “I will make them . . . drink poisoned water”; also Lam. 3:15, 19). Aune (1998a: 522) states that the taste is so potent that one ounce of it can still be detected in 524 gallons of water! The problem here is that not only is the star named “Wormwood,” but when it falls on the fresh waters, “a third of the waters become wormwood.” Wormwood itself is not poisonous, and some have seen an error in the analogy here. However, its connection with bitter sorrow and judgment makes it a natural symbol of death. Therefore, when the next statement tells us that “many^[12] died” as a result, it is hardly surprising. The fiery star turned the water poisonous, and the effect was as bitter as wormwood.^[13] As in Deuteronomy and Jeremiah (above), poisonous water is divine judgment for sin and rebellion. It is also common to see here a reversal of the miracle of

Marah (Exod. 15:23) when Moses threw a piece of wood into the bitter water, turning it sweet. The parallel is obvious, though it is difficult to prove that John had this in mind. Again, this depicts a judgment that would shatter civilization. None of us could imagine a third of all the rivers and lakes turning poisonous. All the scares about polluted waters due to industrial waste in recent years seem quite pallid next to this terrible disaster.

iv. Fourth Trumpet (8:12)

This trumpet judgment replicates the ninth Egyptian plague (Exod. 10:21–23) in which Moses stretched out his hand and Yahweh sent darkness to cover Egypt for three days, a darkness so total that no one could travel anywhere. As the third trumpet sounds, God again “strikes” the heavenly luminaries. Ἐπλήγη (*eplēgē*, was struck) is another graphic verb, picturing a lightning strike or a heavy “blow” delivered to someone.^[14] It is the verb cognate of πλήγη (*plēgē*, plague) used in Rev. 9:18, 20. In other words, God has virtually “struck” the heavenly bodies with a “plague.” As in the other trumpet judgments and unlike Exodus, however, this plague is partial, affecting only one-third of the day and night. At the same time, every heavenly body is named: the sun, moon, and stars.^[15] This is more emphatic than any other OT or NT text in the sense that each type of luminary is named. Moreover, like the Egyptian plague the darkness is total. This is not merely an eclipse; for as all know, there is not total blackness as the result of an eclipse. Nor is it merely a depleting of the light, for it is clear that during that third of the day and of the night darkness reigns. The Greek for this is clumsy: ἵνα σκοτισθῇ τὸ τρίτον αὐτῶν καὶ ἡ ἡμέρα μὴ ἴανη τὸ τρίτον^[16] αὐτῆς καὶ ἡ νύξ ὁμοίως (*hina skotisthē to triton autōn kai hē hēmera mē phanē to triton autēs kai hē nyx homoiōs*, lit., so that a third of them might be darkened, both the day might not shine for a third and the night likewise). The convoluted nature of this sentence with all its repetition emphasizes three things: that both day and night are “alike” (ὁμοίως) without light; that the darkness lasts for a third of their length; and that the darkness means there is absolutely no light (note the presence of both “be darkened” and “might not shine” to state this both positively and negatively).

Darkness and eclipses frequently portray eschatological judgments in the Bible. Darkness characterized the primal world at the start of creation (Gen. 1:2), and throughout Scripture darkness characterizes the world of evil (e.g., Job 12:22; John 3:18–21). Yet God controls darkness and light because he created both (Isa. 45:7; Ps. 104:20). He sent eclipse and darkness not only in the ninth Egyptian plague but also in the famous “sun standing still” incident of Josh. 10:7–14, when both sun and moon “stopped” until the Amorites were completely defeated. This theme was picked up in Jewish apocalyptic, as when Joel describes the day of Yahweh as “a day of darkness and gloom” (2:2; cf. also Zeph. 1:15) and adds “the sun and moon are darkened, and the stars no longer shine” (Joel 2:10; cf. also Isa. 13:10; Ezek. 32:7). In Amos God states, “I will make the sun go down at noon and darken the land in broad daylight” (Amos 8:9; cf. also 5:20). Darkness as divine punishment continued in later writings (Jub. 5.14; 1 Enoch 17.6; 63.6; 2 Enoch 7.1). In Qumran’s writings light and darkness are personified as warring powers, as darkness tries to overcome the people of God (1QM 11.10; 13.11–12), and those who reject the way of light are doomed to eternal darkness (1QS 4.12–13). Both the themes—darkness personifying evil and darkness as judgment—are continued in the NT. The two are part of the same theme, God’s description of and response to evil. In John 1:5 we are told, “The light [of the Word] shines in the darkness, and darkness cannot overcome it.”^[17] God is still in control of darkness and therefore can use it for judgment on the world. In Jesus’ Olivet discourse, which plays so great a role as background particularly to the

seals, the parousia will be preceded by cosmic phenomena: “the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from the sky” (Mark 13:24–25; cf. Rev. 6:12–13). In this sense darkness often means destruction (Matt. 8:12; 22:13; 25:30, where it is linked with “weeping and gnashing of teeth”). Thus in this instance darkness is an apocalyptic judgment on this world. The darkness here prepares for the fifth bowl, where the kingdom of the beast is “darkened” and as a result the followers of the beast “gnaw their tongues in agony” (16:10). There is no pain in this judgment, but such could be implied due to the apocalyptic theme of darkness as pain (see on 16:10).

Summary and Contextualization

The purpose of the first four trumpet judgments is primarily to disprove the earthly gods and to show that Yahweh alone is on the throne. By recapitulating the Egyptian plagues, God wants to make his omnipotence known to the world and to show the futility of turning against him. Each of these judgments addresses a different aspect of life in the ancient world and in the modern world as well. The first shows that the material world is no answer, the second and third address the sea trade, including food supplies, and the fourth focuses on life itself in the heat and light of the celestial bodies. The four together prove that those who live only for this world have chosen foolishly, for only in God is there true life. Earthly things turn on us, and we dare not depend on them.

Additional Notes

8:7. τὸ τρίτον: Beale (1999: 476) believes that the “third” comes from Ezek. 5:2, 12 (cf. Zech. 13:8–9), where it is prophesied that a third of Israel will be destroyed with fire, a third put to the sword, and a third taken captive. This is linked with famine in Ezek. 6:12, and Beale thinks the trumpet judgment here is seen as a fulfillment of Ezekiel’s famine. However, there is too little connection with Ezek. 5 here and no hint that famine is intended in this judgment.

8:8. πυρί: Several late manuscripts omit this word (046 11859 2042 2138 et al.), probably because it seemed unnecessary to the context with καίόμενον. However, the manuscript evidence is quite strong and diverse (ⲓ A P 052 1 94 1006 1611), so it should be included.

c. Fifth Trumpet / First Woe (8:13–9:11)

The last three trumpets are unique in the three septets in that they are preceded by prophetic warnings of woe. The judgment theme initiated by the first four trumpets is now heightened greatly by the announcement by one of the great carrion birds that are to be called to the “great supper of God” (19:17, 21) that is the antithesis of the “wedding supper of the Lamb” in 19:9. While the first four trumpets were directed at nature, these last three are directed at people: those who have rejected God and persecute his people. As Beale (1998: 489) says, the last three are not even called trumpet judgments but “woes” and are “worse than the initial four in that they directly strike the wicked.”

The two trumpet judgments of chapter 9 are three times as long as the first four trumpets (8:6–12) put together. Part of the reason is that they add an important clarification to the themes of the seals, trumpets, and bowls (see the introduction to chap. 6). They prove to the earth-dwellers that the false “gods” they have followed are demonic forces and that these evil powers are not their friends. Indeed, they hate the very ones who worship them. In the Gospels demons possess people for one basic reason, to torture and kill all who are made in the image of God (note the Gadarene demoniac [Mark 5:1–20] or the demon-possessed child [Mark 9:14–29]). This is exactly the pattern with the locust plague (Rev. 9:1–11) and the demonic cavalry (9:12–19). The locusts torture the earth-dwellers for five months so terribly that people long for death. Then the horsemen give them the death they have sought, and one-third of humankind dies. Yet the tragedy of sin continues. In spite of absolute proof of both the omnipotence of God and the hatred of the false gods for their own followers, evil people do not repent but reject God’s offer and return again to worship the very evil powers that had just tortured and killed so many of them (9:20–21).

- i. Introduction/first woe (8:13)
- ii. First woe/fifth trumpet (9:1–11)
 - (1) Descending star-angel opens the abyss (9:1)
 - (2) Locust plague from the abyss (9:2–6)
 - (3) Description of locusts (9:7–10)
 - (4) King of the demonic swarm (9:11)

Exegesis and Exposition

¹³And I looked and heard an eagle flying in midair and calling with a loud voice, “Woe! Woe! Woe to the inhabitants of the earth because of the remaining trumpet blasts of the three angels who are about to sound their trumpets.”

^{9:1}And the fifth angel sounded his trumpet, and I saw a star that had fallen from heaven to the earth. God gave him the key to the shaft of the abyss. ²When he opened the shaft of the abyss, there ascended from the shaft of the abyss a great cloud like smoke. And the sun and the air were darkened because of the smoke from the shaft. ³And out of the smoke locusts poured forth to the earth, and God gave them power, as earthly scorpions have power. ⁴And God told them that they could not harm the grass of the earth or any plant or any tree, but only those people who do not have the seal of God on their foreheads. ⁵God did not give them authority (power) to kill them but to torture them for five months, and their torment was like the torment caused by a scorpion when it stings a person. ⁶And in those days people will seek death and will never find it; they will long for death, but death will keep on fleeing from them.

⁷The appearance of the locusts was like horses made ready for war, and on their heads (they had) as it were crowns resembling gold, and their faces were like human faces. ⁸They had hair like the hair of women, and their teeth resembled lions’ teeth. ⁹They

had breastplates like breastplates of iron, and the sound of their wings resembled the sound of many chariots drawn by horses running into battle. ¹⁰They continued to have tails and stings like scorpions, and they had power in their tails to injure people for five months. ¹¹They also continued to have a king over them, the angel of the abyss. His name in Hebrew was Abaddon, and his name in Greek was Apollyon.

i. Introduction/First Woe (8:13)

Only once before, in 5:11, is a section introduced by καὶ εἶδον, καὶ ἤκουσα (*kai eidon, kai ēkousa*, and I looked and heard), although the two also occur in the same context in 6:1, 5–6, 7–8. As in 5:11, the emphasis is not so much on the sight of the “eagle” as on its message. The ἑνὸς ἀετοῦ (*henos aetou*, an eagle)^[1] could be either an eagle or a vulture. While some have tried to make a distinction of the passage’s thrust depending on whether the bird here is one or the other,^[2] the differences are due more to a modern view of the two birds than to the ancient view of the two. Both Hebrew נֶשֶׁר (*nešer*) and Greek ἀετός refer to either the eagle or the vulture, for both were known for their size, strength, and speed, and they were the foremost birds of prey. One aspect that would favor an eagle here is that the Romans had an eagle on their standards (see below on the eagle as a symbol of Rome), and eagles were viewed as the messengers of the gods. While in the Torah the eagle/vulture was an unclean bird (Lev. 11:13; Deut. 14:12),^[3] it is a symbol used in the OT for five things (van Broekhoven, *ISBE* 2:2): the power and swiftness of flight, often symbolizing deliverance (Exod. 19:4; Prov. 23:5; Isa. 40:31), portents of death and destruction (Jer. 48:40–42; Hos. 8:1), nesting as a symbol for God’s creative power (Job 39:27–30) or care (Deut. 32:11), regal appearance (Ezek. 1:10; 10:14), and youthful vigor and strength (Ps. 103:5; Isa. 40:31). In apocalyptic writings the eagle/vulture delivered messages (2 Bar. 77.17–26, where it told the exiles about Baruch’s vision) and became a symbol of the Roman Empire (2 Esdr. [4 Ezra] 11:1–12:30; As. Mos. 10.8). The great bird appears twice in the NT outside Revelation, in the Q saying of Matt. 24:28 (par. Luke 17:37) as a picture of doom (“Wherever there is a carcass, there the vultures will gather”). In the Apocalypse the eagle stands for grandeur, power, and a harbinger of judgment. In 4:7 the fourth living creature was like an eagle, pictured as a regal bird before the throne of God, the highest of God’s flying creatures. In 12:14 the woman pursued by the dragon is given “the two wings of the great eagle” to bear her to safety, certainly focusing on the ability of the eagle to fly high above the troubles of this life (cf. Isa. 40:31). Here the primary thrust is the second OT use, a portent of death and destruction, as the eagle announces the three woe judgments about to come.

The emphasis on the eagle “flying in midair” may well be to link its activity with the other two times μεσουράνημα (*mesouranēma*, midair) is used: in 14:6 (the angel proclaiming “the eternal gospel”) and 19:17 (the carrion birds called to the feast of the flesh of the armies destroyed in the final battle). Humankind must choose between the two fates, and the three woes are part of both the last chance to respond to the call to repentance (9:20–21) and the announcement of doom for those who refuse that call. Also, in all three passages the emphasis is on their visibility. All “saw” the event and could not fail to “hear” the message.

The message that the eagle delivers dominates the next chapter. The threefold οὐαὶ οὐαὶ οὐαὶ (*ouai ouai ouai*, woe, woe, woe) is probably due to the three trumpet judgments to come, but it is also the obverse of the threefold “holy, holy, holy” addressed to God in 4:8 (also in Isa. 6:3). Threefold acclamation provides the greatest possible emphasis on God’s holiness (4:8) as well as his judgment (8:13). Indeed, his holiness demands his judgment. There is a twofold “woe” in Ezek. 16:23 (as in Rev. 18:10, 16, 19 in the three funeral dirges to “Babylon”) addressed to unfaithful Jerusalem due to its idolatry and immorality. This is an intensification of that declaration of impending doom. Οὐαὶ

interestingly resembles (onomatopoeia) the sound an eagle makes.^[4] The background is almost certainly the “woe oracles” of the OT that depict the anger and guarantee the judgment of God against those who have forsaken him (e.g., Isa. 5:8–9; Amos 6:1–2; Hab. 2:9–10). It does not depict sorrow on the part of those who have sinned (as some have mistakenly interpreted “woe” in Luke 6:24–26) but is an announcement of disaster to come. This disaster is to fall on “those who dwell on the earth.” This is the third of ten times this phrase is used (see on 3:10), and it is the antithesis of “those who dwell in heaven” (12:12; 13:6). The “inhabitants of the earth” (hence the term “earth-dwellers” used throughout this commentary) are those who follow the beast (13:8; 17:8) and both oppose and kill the saints (6:10; 11:10). Therefore it is natural that they be the object of the wrath of God. The reason^[5] for these three woes is then said to be “the remaining trumpet blasts of the three angels.” As a result, each of the final three trumpets is also called “the first woe,” and so on. These judgments are imminent, for the trumpets are “about to sound.”^[6]

ii. First Woe/Fifth Trumpet (9:1–11)

The first of the doublet of judgments in 9:1–19 tells of a particularly terrifying invasion of supernatural locusts from the “pits of hell” (the abyss) that heaps torture on the earth-dwellers for five months. There are two emphases: (1) the demons turn on the very people who follow them and show their utter contempt and incomparable cruelty by torturing their worshipers; (2) God is in control and directs the entire event. As Kiddle (1940: 158) says, “by exhausting every attempt to bring them [the nations] to a better mind, God demonstrates His sovereignty, vindicates His holiness, and justifies His final sentence of doom.”

(1) Descending Star-Angel Opens the Abyss (9:1)

A particularly difficult interpretive problem occurs here. John sees ἀστέρα ἐκ τοῦ οὐρανοῦ πεπτωκότα εἰς τὴν γῆν (*astera ek tou ouranou peptōkota eis tēn gēn*, a star fallen^[7] from the sky to the earth). We know from 1:20 that stars are often a symbol of angels (see also Judg. 5:20; Job 38:7; 1 Enoch 88.1; T. Sol. 8.2–11; 18.1–42 for stars personified as angels), but is this a good angel or a fallen angel? Many believe this has to be a demon (see Kiddle, Walvoord, Sweet, Boring, LaVerdiere 1999: 607), perhaps Satan himself (Swete, Hendriksen, Chilton), for he is described as “fallen from the sky,” and this fits the imagery of Rev. 12:7–9, where the “dragon and his angels” are cast out of heaven “to the earth,” as well as Luke 10:18, “I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven.” This image could build on Isa. 14:12–14, which describes the king of Babylon as “fallen from heaven” and describes him as the “morning star . . . cast down to the earth.” This passage from Isaiah was later applied to Satan (2 Enoch 29.4–5; Adam and Eve 12, 15–18; cf. 1 Enoch 86.3; 88.1–3; 90.24–26). Also, there could be an *inclusio* with the “angel of the abyss” in 9:11, framing the fifth trumpet with the actions of Satan. Beale (1999: 491–92) feels strongly that this is an evil angel sent from God and argues that always in the OT and Jewish writings a “falling star” refers to a fallen angel. However, this would be the only place in Revelation where God used an evil angel to execute his will, and there is too little evidence that this is the exception. S. Thompson (1999: 261–63) asks how a fallen angel could be entrusted with the key to his own prison. As several note (R. Charles, Ladd, Morris, Thomas, Giesen), when describing a star there was little difference between “falling” (1 Enoch 86.1; 88.1) and “descending” (1 Enoch 86.3). In this sense, the action of the angel here would parallel that of the angel “descending from heaven” with “the key to the abyss” in Rev. 20:1 (these might be one and the same angel). In the third trumpet judgment we saw a blazing star fall from the sky, and

that was certainly not a fallen angel. Therefore, this was another of the angelic messengers sent from heaven to do God's will. In 1 Enoch 20.2 the archangel Suru'el (or Uriel) is placed in charge "of eternity and of Tartarus" (the Hellenistic place of final punishment).

God gives the angel ἡ κλεῖς τοῦ Ἰρέατος τῆς[8] ἀβύσσου (*hē kleis tou phreatos tēs abyssou*, the key to the shaft of the abyss). Here we have another of the frequent appearances of ἐδόθη (*edothē*, was given), indicating God's sovereign control over the action (see 6:2, 4, 8; 7:2; 8:2, 3). The "abyss" stems from imagery originally associated with the fathomless depths of the ocean, as in the "surface of the deep" in Gen. 1:2 (LXX τῆς ἀβύσσου; cf. also Gen. 7:11; 8:2). In several places it speaks of "the waters of the great deep" (Ps. 42:7; Isa. 51:10). The "abyss" became an idiom for the place of the dead ("the depths of the earth," Ps. 63:9; 71:20); and possibly because the dead were unclean, it came to be used for the "pit" or "prison house" (1 Enoch 18.14) in which fallen angels were imprisoned (1 Enoch 10.4–6; 18.9–16; Jub. 5.3–11). In the NT it occurs twice outside Revelation: for the place of the dead in Rom. 10:7 and for the prison for evil spirits in Luke 8:31. The imagery is also found in 2 Pet. 2:4 and Jude 6, where angels are "kept in darkness, bound with everlasting chains." In Revelation the "abyss" is a closed prison, and when it is opened, the smoke of its fires emerges (9:2), and the "beast" will emerge from it at the time appointed by God (11:7; 17:8). In the abyss Satan will be imprisoned for a thousand years, and it will again be locked for that time (20:1–3). The "shaft" of the abyss refers to the "pit" (the term means a "well") that goes down to the prison house itself.

(2) Locust Plague from the Abyss (9:2–6)

Christ is in sovereign control of the abyss, and as said in 3:7, "What he opens no one can shut, and what he shuts no one can open." Thus as his representative, the star-angel inserts the key and "opens the abyss." Then a huge column of ἀνέβη καπνὸς . . . ὡς καπνὸς καμίνου μεγάλης (*anebē kapnos . . . hōs kapnos kaminou megalēs*, smoke ascended . . . like smoke from[9] a giant furnace). There are several biblical uses of "smoke rising from a furnace" that have relevance to this context. Exodus 19:18 states that when Yahweh descended on Mount Sinai, smoke "billowed up . . . like smoke from a furnace" (see also Ps. 104:32; 144:5), pointing to smoke's theophanic connection. Also, divine wrath is depicted as "smoke from his nostrils" (2 Sam. 22:9 par. Ps. 18:8; Job 41:20). In Joel 2:30 "blood and fire and billows of smoke" will designate the day of Yahweh. The destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah was described as "dense smoke rising from the land, like smoke from a furnace" (Gen. 19:28). While this is certainly not a theophany, it is an act of God, a sign of his wrath and coming destruction. Also, the idea of smoke (and the fire that causes it) is connected to the imagery of Gehenna in the Gospels and the "lake of fire" in Rev. 19:20; 20:10, 14, 15 (the idea of a "giant furnace" would also point to the fires of hell).

The smoke cloud is so dense that "the sun and the air were darkened." As the idea of a star descending was an echo of the third trumpet, this is an echo of the fourth trumpet, in which the sun, moon, and stars were "darkened" for a third of the day and night. In other words, this is a summary judgment that consummates the others. This recalls Joel 2:10 in which the locusts are so dense that "the sun and moon are darkened, and the stars no longer shine." With the reference to Joel 2:30 regarding the smoke, and the presence of the locust plague in the succeeding verses, Joel 2 is a major passage behind the imagery here. Joel 2:1 begins with a prophetic warning that is interesting for Rev. 9: "Blow the trumpet in Zion," picturing a watchman warning the people of an enemy attack. As Dillard (1992: 271) says, "Joel's version of the day of the Lord reverses Israel's hopes. Instead of myriads of thousands of the winged hosts of the heavenly army coming to the

protection, aid, and vindication of the nation, Joel describes a cloud of winged creatures coming rather in devastating judgment.” The vision here has similar connotations, except that it is even more devastating in one respect: these locusts come straight from the pit of hell!

Out of the dense smoke now pours forth “locusts to the earth.”^[10] The locusts reenact not only Joel 1:2–2:11 but also the eighth Egyptian plague (Exod. 10:1–20). Locusts were one of the few insects allowed as food (Lev. 11:22), but they are best known in Scripture for their incredible swarms and the plagues that resulted. The Egyptian plague was described as the worst in past or future history (Exod. 10:14), but incredible disasters have been recorded up to the present day. Firmage (ABD 6:1150) describes an eyewitness account of the 1915 locust plague in Palestine: “Swarms of locusts flew overhead for five days, darkening the sky and leaving droppings everywhere.” The devastation of the land was total. Mounce (1998: 186–87) speaks of swarms four miles in length and a hundred feet thick and of 200,000 people who died in a famine following an 1866 plague in Algiers. In the OT locusts were also used as a warning, lest God send another such plague on an apostate people (Deut. 28:38–42). Amos spoke of locust plagues that Yahweh sent against an unrepentant nation (Amos 4:9), and the image of locusts was often used to depict military judgments sent by God (Jer. 46:23; 51:14; Nah. 3:15–17). The great locust plague of Joel 1:2–2:11 is a harbinger of “the great and dreadful day of Yahweh” (2:31), and all the locust imagery is consummated in this scene here. As Aune (1998a: 527) says, “These are demons in the guise of locusts, for their king is Abaddon, the angel of the abyss [Rev. 9:11].” As they ascend from the abyss, they parallel the ascent of the beast in 11:7; 17:8.

In the second act of divine sovereignty (see 9:1), the locusts ἐδόθη . . . ἐξουσία (*edothē . . . exousia*, were given authority) by God. Ἐξουσία can mean both “authority” and “power.” Both connotations are intended here; God gives the locusts authority over the earth-dwellers and power to inflict harm on them. This parallels 13:7, in which the beast “is given authority to make war against the saints.” This is part of an important theme in this book. Even the demonic forces can do nothing, unless God allows it! Many have the mistaken opinion that Satan has autonomy from God and can do whatever he wishes. That could not be further from the truth. Satan is powerless and has already lost at the cross (see 5:6). Everything he and his followers do in this book can only be done after God gives permission. Even more than that, all the actions of the evil forces are part of the divine will, thus part of the divine plan. God is using the locusts to achieve his larger purpose, judgment on the earth-dwellers. As in God’s control of the four horsemen of 6:1–8, however, God does not have to command the demonic locusts to do anything; he simply allows their evil to express itself.

The description of these “locusts” in ensuing verses is built on real locusts but goes beyond them. They are not allowed to eat vegetation (9:4) but are transformed into beings “like scorpions”^[11] and hurt people rather than trees. They “come out” of the abyss rather than from the natural world and are a demonic force, not just insects (see Caird, Beasley-Murray, Thomas). “Scorpions” were widespread in the Mediterranean world. They look like lobsters but belong to the spider family, and their sting is quite severe, fatal to some children. The OT links them with snakes as dangerous denizens of the desert (Deut. 8:15), and the scorpion became a metaphor for terrible punishment (1 Kings 12:11, 14). In Luke 10:19 Jesus uses “snakes and scorpions” as symbols of demonic forces. Thus the scorpion like the locust was a natural symbol for the demonic “powers.” Here the “power” of a scorpion to cause intense pain is given to the locusts. As some have pointed out (Aune 1998a: 527; Beale 1999: 495), the purpose here is to use the locusts/scorpions to intimidate, demoralize, and terrorize the earth-dwellers (so v. 5).

God now gives them a second command. Ἐρρέθη αὐτοῖς (*errethē autois*, it was said to them) is another divine passive, “God told them.” At first, this seems a confusing order; locusts from time immemorial have always consumed only vegetation—grass, plants, and trees. God tells them not to consume the very thing that is their reason for being. In both Exodus (10:15) and Joel (2:3) it is the vegetation that is the focus of the locust plagues. However, we have already seen that these are locustlike creatures that act like scorpions, and scorpions, like snakes, are quite hostile to human beings. Therefore we are not totally surprised to learn that they cannot harm any vegetation.^[12] Here we must remember that the judgment against vegetation has already taken place in the first trumpet judgment, as a third of the trees and all the grass^[13] were consumed by fire (8:7), and the first four judgments (8:6–12) were hurled down upon the world of nature. These next two judgments concern not nature but humanity, so the vegetation is to be unharmed. That it is locusts here doing the damage adds poignancy and theological power to the image. Aune (1998a: 528–29) sees this as a doublet of 7:2–3, where the angels holding the four winds were also told not to harm the natural realm, along with an emphasis on the sealing of the saints.

These symbols of God’s judgment are now directed at people, not nature. As in 3:10 and 7:1–8, God’s people are exempt from his judgments in the seals, trumpets, and bowls. Only those who have rejected his call to repentance (9:20–21) are subject to judgment, both because the judgments are divine retaliation (see the introduction to chap. 6) for their evil deeds and because they constitute the final call and opportunity to turn from the world of sin. The mention of “the seal of God on their foreheads” goes right back to 7:3–4, where the saints are “sealed” to show that they are “God’s own possession” and that they are to be protected from the outpouring of his wrath (see also 3:10). Also, it is worded this way because the image of the “mark” on the foreheads of the unsaved is not introduced until 13:16. In a close parallel Jesus said to his disciples in Luke 10:18–19, “I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven. I have given you authority to trample on snakes and scorpions; . . . nothing will harm you.” In Exodus the people of God are kept from the plagues to make it obvious to both the nation and the Egyptians that God’s mercy belongs only to his followers (Exod. 8:22–23; 9:4, 6; 10:23; 11:7; 12:13; cf. 19:5), and the theme is much the same here. However, those who have rejected God and his seal will face the “wrath of God and the Lamb” (6:16–17).

God now gives a third command, again centering on the divine passive ἑδόθη αὐτοῖς (*edothē autois*, it was given to them that; see 9:3). As they inflict serious injury on the earth-dwellers, they could not^[14] “kill them” but only βασανισθήσονται^[15] μῆνας πέντε (*basanisthēsontai mēnas pente*, torment [them] five months). This is an important limitation, for it becomes obvious that the “torture/kill” schema of the fifth and sixth trumpets links them together into a single whole. Βασανίζω and its cognate noun occur eleven times in Revelation (three times in this verse), both of the torment of the earth-dwellers (11:10; 14:9–11; 18:7, 10, 15) and of the demonic powers (20:10). The verb originally connoted testing (of metals) and was sometimes used in secular Greek for judicial examination. It came to be used of the testing of slaves and others by torture and thus of torture or torment by itself (by disease [Matt. 8:6], in birth [Rev. 12:2], mental torment [2 Pet. 2:8], or physical exertion [Mark 6:48]). In the OT and Jewish writings it denoted the retribution of God upon the ungodly (Ezek. 32:24, 30) who had “tormented” the saints (Wis. 2:19). In this context the term speaks of the torment of the unsaved as judgment for their rejection of God and mistreatment of his people.

The period the locusts could torment the unsaved was “five months.”^[16] This period could refer to the life span of the locust or to the dry season in Palestine between the “early and latter rain”

(April to August) when locusts tended to appear (R. Charles 1920: 1.243). A locust swarm usually lasts only a few days, so this could also refer to an abnormally long period of time for such a plague.^[17] These are supernatural locusts, however, so such issues are not endemic to the imagery. The torment stretches to the limits of the period, and the main point is that God has placed a strict time limit on the torture, possibly to give the people time to repent (9:20–21). The rest of the verse describes the βασανισμός (*basanismos*, torment, agony) of the earth-dwellers. This cognate of the verb above is stressed, appearing twice in 9:5b. Louw and Nida (1988: 1.287) see it as one of the strongest terms for pain or suffering, defining it as “severe pain associated with torture and torment.” The term is used in 14:10–11 for “the smoke of the torment” of the unsaved. Thus the pain here is a harbinger of the pain to be experienced in the eternal torment of the lake of fire (cf. 20:10, “tormented day and night forever and ever”). This “intense pain” is caused by the scorpionlike “sting” (actually “torment”; cf. 9:10 below) of the locusts. John here uses the graphic πείω (*paĩō*, strike, sting) that pictures the scorpion “striking” the person with its deadly tail. The pain is intense, but a scorpion sting is rarely deadly to any human except a small infant. This fits the picture of 9:4–6 well, although it is difficult to imagine being stung multiple times over a five-month period and surviving.

The despair caused by such torment is reflected in the statement that during that time^[18] “people will seek death.” Moreover, there is strong parallelism in verse 6. In the first half of the verse they “will seek” death, but the second half intensifies this as they ἐπιθυμήσουσιν (*epithymēsousin*, will desire) death. This verb expresses “a particularly strong desire” that drives a person to want a thing (Schönweiss, *NIDNTT* 1:457). The two verbs together show an adamant demand for death and could refer to attempting suicide. This echoes the similar plea in 6:15–16, when the populace that had martyred God’s people begged for an avalanche to fall on them and hide them from God’s wrath. The Stoics viewed suicide as not just honorable but exemplary since by it the individual was taking control over fate. Among the Roman nobility suicide became preferable to political disgrace. The OT contains five suicides: Abimelech (Judg. 9:54) and Saul (1 Sam. 31:4) after being mortally wounded; Saul’s armor-bearer after Saul died (1 Sam. 31:5); Ahithophel after being rejected by Absalom (2 Sam. 17:23); and Zimri after a coup failed (1 Kings 16:18). Job contemplated suicide (7:15; possibly 13:15) but decided against it. In a close parallel to the idea here, in 3:21 Job spoke of “those who long for death that does not come, who search for it more than for hidden treasure.” In certain religious circumstances, the Jews preferred suicide over surrender to pagan armies, as at Masada or the story of Razis, who wanted “to die nobly rather than to fall into the hands of sinners” (2 Macc. 14:37–46). In the NT only Judas commits suicide (Matt. 27:3–10), though Paul talked of preferring death in Phil. 1:21, 23 (see Droge, *ABD* 6:225–31). Here in Revelation it is the enemies of God who prefer suicide over pain.

God will not allow them to die, however, until the right time, namely during the next demonic invasion. There is a certain irony in that they have killed the martyrs of 6:9–11, but God will not let them die.^[19] This continues the theme of *lex talionis* (“the law of retribution”) as seen in 16:6 and 18:6. Because of the heinous nature of the crimes committed against God and his people, those who have martyred the saints will be paid in kind and more. They have tortured and killed, so they will now be tortured and killed by the same malignant forces that have goaded them into committing their awful deeds. John has again painted a graphic portrayal of the judgment. They want to die, but death **λεύγει** (*pheugei*, flees) from them. John has deliberately switched from future tenses to a dramatic present here,^[20] picturing death as it “keeps on fleeing” away from them.

(3) Description of Locusts (9:7–10)

This is certainly one of the more bizarre descriptions of the book, and one dare not take the details too far. It seems that John is combining the locust, the scorpion, and the warriors of an invading army (the Romans were particularly paranoid about the dangers of invasion). These go far beyond a locust or a scorpion in the sense that they seem to be supernaturally large and incredibly fearsome. John also draws imagery from the description of the locusts in Joel 1:6–7 and 2:4–5, “A nation has invaded my land, powerful and without number; it has the teeth of a lion, the fangs of a lioness. . . . They have the appearance of horses; they gallop along like cavalry. With the noise like that of chariots they leap over the mountaintops, like a crackling fire consuming stubble, like a mighty army drawn up for battle.” While they inflict harm with their tails (9:5, 10), they instill terror with their appearance.^[21]

John first describes the appearance of the locusts as “like horses made ready for battle,” echoing Joel 2:4–5. At the same time, the head of an actual locust resembles a horse. Warhorses in the ancient world were incredibly fearsome animals. Most of the horses mentioned in the Bible were warhorses, as in the description in Job 39:19–25, “Do you give the horse his strength . . . make him leap like a locust, striking terror with his proud snorting? He paws fiercely . . . and charges into the fray. He laughs at fear . . . (and) does not shy away from the sword. . . . At the blast of the trumpet he snorts, ‘Aha!’ He catches the scent of battle from afar, the shout of commanders and the battle cry.” Roman warhorses were very large, bred for battle, taught to bite, and equipped with razor sharp hooves. The added “ready for war” also shows the nature of the entire plague: the demons were going to war against their followers.

From their overall appearance John turns to details, proceeding down from their heads to their faces, their hair, their breastplates, their wings, and finally to their tails. On their heads they had ὥς^[22] στέφανοι ὅμοιοι χρυσῷ^[23] (*hōs stephanoi homoioi chrysō*, as it were crowns like gold). Many different interpretations have been given for the gold crowns: the yellow hair of Germanic invaders, the bronze helmets burnished with gold of the Roman soldiers, the yellow tips of the antlers of a locust (or the yellowish green of its breast), or simply a symbol of victory. Much of this is unnecessary, and the last option is probably best. John is using the “gold crown” as a metaphor common in the Roman world for a victorious conqueror. A στέφανος was a wreath made either of leaves (often for the victor in an athletic contest) or precious metals like gold when it indicated special authority. Domitian sometimes wore a gold crown, and Josephus (*Ant.* 3.7.6 §172) relates that the high priest frequently wore a gold crown symbolizing the authority of his office. In Revelation the twenty-four elders wear gold crowns (4:4), as does the “one like a son of man” in 14:14. Therefore, the true “gold crown” in this book is reserved for celestial beings who have the authority of God. The contrast is deliberate. John describes these beings as having “crowns like gold,” and the added ὅμοιοι, which with the dative always means “resembling,” means these are not true “gold crowns” like those elsewhere in the book. The “goldlike crown” here is a usurper’s crown, as the demonic locusts claim for themselves an authority they do not possess. Like the emperor Domitian, they will have earthly authority (Satan is “the god of this world,” 2 Cor. 4:4) but no cosmic or final authority.

Next, their faces are “like human faces.” This is unusual and hard to explain. There are four possibilities: (1) Most commentators take this very generally, saying that John has combined human and animal characteristics in a supernatural being. (2) There is no reference to human likeness in the description in Joel 1–2, but the third living creature in Rev. 4:7 had a “face like a

man,” with wording similar to this. This could be another imitation of divine beings (with the golden crowns above) by these demonic hordes. (3) Some (Swete, Roloff, Thomas) have noted the connection between this attribute and the next one, where their hair is “like women’s hair,” perhaps centering on male-female relations (cf. 1 Cor. 7:1) but more likely stressing the human connection, perhaps the intelligence and cunning of these creatures. (4) These three are not mutually exclusive, and each fits the context. One could combine them by saying this image shows the desire of all demonic beings to usurp God’s creation for themselves and become the apex of creation, the place that humankind holds.

As shown, the description of the locusts’ hair as “like women’s hair” is placed here deliberately to add imagery to “human faces.” Background to this image has been found in the “hairy” antennae of the locust, the hair on the legs of locusts, and the long hair of Parthian warriors (see on 6:2) as they went into battle. The first two are far-fetched and little connected to the actual “hair” of a locust. The third is quite possible in light of Roman paranoia over the fearsome Parthians (who had defeated the Romans twice and were still a great threat) but ultimately cannot move beyond the realm of possibility. It is probably best to see this as a simple reference to women’s hair and as further evidence of the humanlike (imitation?) characteristics of the demonic locusts (see on 9:7). Michaels (1997: 127 note on 9:7–9) says this “reinforces the impression—borne out by the personified King Apollyon in verse 11—that in the world of the Bible ultimate evil, like ultimate good, wears a human face.” Aune (1998a: 582) provides a further possible explanation, saying it pictures a woman with loose, disheveled hair. Disheveled hair connoted several things in the OT: uncleanness for people with leprosy (Lev. 13:45), mourning (Lev. 10:6; 21:10), proper protocol for a woman accused of adultery (Num. 5:18), and even the appearance of a demon (T. Sol. 13.1) or Satan (Apoc. Zeph. 6.8). Many of these images would fit the situation here.

With the next image we return to Joel 1:6, “the teeth of a lion, the fangs of a lioness.” Here all are agreed, for both lions and locusts are known for their fierce appetites. Of course, the comparison is not absolute, for these creatures do not rend their victims and devour them like lions but rather sting with their tails. First Pet. 5:8 states that “the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour” (cf. Ps. 58:6; 2 Tim. 4:17), and that is close to the meaning here. The locust tears vegetation in just such a way, but here they are attacking human beings (see 9:4).

The locust also had “breastplates like breastplates of iron.” This is a double reference to the actual description of locusts (whose “thorax” [this is a transliteration of the Greek term here] resembled armor) and to the tendency of some armies (especially the Parthians) to protect their warhorses with just such a piece of armor (called a *προστερνίδιον*, *prosternidion*). As with humans, such an iron breastplate protected both the sides and back of the warhorse and rendered it unassailable in the midst of battle (see Gordon 1983: 338–39). This stresses the invincibility of these terrible creatures and enhances the terrifying nature of this description.

The next description also stems both from the actual description of a locust swarm and the metaphor of warfare. The terrifying “sound of their wings” certainly describes an actual locust swarm, as many eyewitness testimonies have shown. Here it is likened to *φωνὴ ἁρμάτων ἵππων πολλῶν* (*phōnē harmatōn hippōn pollōn*, the sound of many chariots drawn by horses).^[24] This adds to the likeness of the locusts to warhorses (9:7) the even more terrifying imagery of war chariots and alludes to Joel 2:5, “a noise like that of chariots.” There was no more devastating weapon of war in the ancient world. The conquest of Canaan by the Hebrews was relegated primarily to the highlands because the plains were dominated by the chariots of the Canaanites, and the Israelites had no answer. As Beitzel (1985: 102) says, “it seems that wherever the Philistines or their allies

could run iron chariots—namely, in the Philistine plain (Judg. 1:19) or the Jezreel valley (Josh. 17:16)—the Israelites could not conquer the terrain. But where this technological superiority was neutralized by the rugged mountain highlands of Palestine’s interior and Transjordan, Israel carved out its developing kingdom.” The later military success of Israel somewhat depended on the quality of its chariot corps. During the peaceful reign of Solomon, he had 1,400 chariots (1 Kings 10:26), and the defeat of the chariot corps of Ahab doomed Israel to second-rate status. They never recovered (see Lane, *BEB* 1:176–77). Many felt that the larger the chariot force, the better—the Ammonites hired 32,000 chariots against Joab’s army (1 Chron. 19:7). The Romans also made chariots an important part of their military. Therefore, this was a particularly fearsome sound, especially since these chariots were “running into battle,” continuing the emphasis on the demonic locusts going to war against the earth-dwellers.

The final part of their description returns to 9:5, focusing on the terrible purpose of the locust swarm to torture the nations with continuous scorpion stings. In 9:5 it could be thought that the scorpion sting was only a simile (“like that of a scorpion sting”). Here we learn that this is not metaphorical but is pictured as what really will happen, as this adds to 9:3, 5 the actual way the stings will be inflicted. Also, this turns from their terrifying appearance (9:7–9) to their even more horrifying deeds. First, we are told ἔχουσιν οὐράς ὁμοίας σκορπίοις καὶ κέντρα (*echousin ouras homoiās skorpíois kai kéntra*, they have tails and stings like a scorpion). Two grammatical points show the emphasis: (1) the verb is present tense, following past tenses in 9:7–9, thereby dramatically emphasizing the ongoing action of the demonic swarm as they torment their victims; (2) καὶ κέντρα is last in the clause for emphasis, adding further emphasis to their terrible purpose. Κέντρα is used in two other places in the NT: the “goad” with which Christ “pricked” Paul’s conscience (Acts 26:14) and the “sting of death” that was nullified by the cross (1 Cor. 15:55). It was also a name given to the “sting” of the scourge as an instrument of torture. This completes the picture of verse 5, which described the βασανισμός (*basanismos*, torment) of the scorpion-locust but not the means. Now we know that it is indeed a torturous “sting.” Moreover, the sting was at the tip of its “tail” (like the actual scorpion), and John repeats from 9:5 that God allowed them to “hurt” (ἀδικέω, *adikeō*, from 9:4) the people for five months. As stated earlier, this limited time period has two purposes: from the demons’ standpoint, they have always sought to torture and then kill (9:15) all who are made in the image of God, even their own followers; and from God’s standpoint, this is a short period during which the people of earth are given a chance to realize the fruit of following Satan, then repent and “glorify God” (11:13; 14:7).

(4) King of the Demonic Swarm (9:11)

Proverbs 30:27 states that “locusts have no king,” but here we learn that these demonic locusts not only have ἐπ’ αὐτῶν βασιλέα (*ep’ autōn basílea*, a king over them), but that he is τὸν ἄγγελον τῆς ἀβύσσου (*ton angelon tēs abyssou*, the angel of the abyss). As stated in Rev. 9:1, this could be the same angel as the one who descends with the “key” to the abyss in verse 1, but it is more likely that the angel with the key was a messenger from God while this is a denizen of the underworld. Indeed, there is reason to believe it may be Satan himself or at least one of his chief lieutenants (more likely the latter). Aune (1998a: 534) argues that even though Satan is carefully named elsewhere in the book and “the king of the abyss” is not mentioned again, the presence of the article (τὸν ἄγγελον) means the figure was well known and must therefore be Satan/Belial himself. But that reads more into the article than is there; it could mean this is the same angel as in 9:1 (see above for arguments against this) or that the readers were familiar with the name “Abaddon.” This latter is the best

option. Elsewhere in this book, the “kings” are those earthly rulers who follow the beast and do his bidding (16:14; 17:2, 10–11) in contradistinction to “the King of the ages” (15:3) and the “King of kings” (19:16). Here alone is there a demonic “king” who does Satan’s will and leads the swarm as it tortures the people of the earth.

The two names are synonyms, one the Hebrew form and the other the Greek form. The Hebrew name is אַבְדּוֹן (*ʾAbaddôn*; Greek Ἀβδδών, *Abaddōn*, *Abaddon*), which turns the Hebrew word for “destroy” (אַבַּד, *ʾabad*) into a proper name, “Destroyer.” In apocalyptic the term is often used for the destruction of the world. This virtually becomes a title for the fifth and sixth trumpets, identifying them as “Destruction.” Yet there is also a certain irony in that the “Destroyer” was himself soon to be destroyed (19:20; 20:10, 14). In several OT texts this term is used of the place of the dead (Job 26:6; Ps. 87:12 LXX; Prov. 15:11; 27:20). Thus this “king” is named for the very place he rules. As “Death and Hades” are personified in 6:8 and 20:13, so is “the Destroyer” here (a virtual synonym for Hades). Beale (1999: 504) sees background in the “angel of death” in the exodus plagues, called “the destroyer” in Exod. 12:23. In 2 Thess. 2:3 the Antichrist is called “the son of destruction.” Bauckham (1993b: 65) believes that “Abaddon” refers to the “angel of death” (2 Bar. 21.23) to whom God has assigned the underworld, and this is a real possibility. The Greek term is Ἀπολλύων (*Apollyōn*, *Apollyon*, the participle of ἀπόλλυμι). While this means virtually the same thing as the Hebrew term, there is an interesting and viable twist that if true will add a great deal to the context. The name of the Greek god Apollo was taken from this term, and the locust was one of his symbols, since he was the god of pestilence and plague. Moreover, the emperor Domitian (perhaps ruler of Rome at the time of writing) viewed himself as Apollo incarnate. Therefore, this could be another of the many references to the imperial cult (see the introduction and the discussion of chaps. 2–3). Throughout this book the Roman Empire is seen as demonic, and this would be a powerful way of getting that across. However, this is a side point even if the cryptic reference to Domitian were true. The real message is that the demonic forces are organized, powerful, terrifying, and filled with hatred and contempt for their followers. As soon as God grants them permission, they torture and kill all who have rejected God in order to worship them.

Summary and Contextualization

When applying this incredible passage, we must remember again the connection between the futurist, idealist, and preterist approaches. The fifth and sixth trumpets are primarily telling what God is going to do in the period just before the eschaton (futurist). These are judgments God will pour out upon the unsaved world. They will have several purposes, as already stated. Uppermost, they will demonstrate once more the absolute sovereignty of God over all creatures and events in his created world. Even the demonic powers can act only when he allows them to do so. When they do act, however, it is always to do harm against all who are made in the image of God, even their own followers. In keeping with the portrait of demonic possession in the Gospels, they will torture and then kill the earth-dwellers. Yet all this is part of a larger plan of God, and that plan is redemptive. Through the terrible actions of the demons, God is calling the nations to repentance. In the locust plague, as the plagues in Egypt, God shows the unbelievers the powerlessness of their earthly gods. Even more, he shows the true nature of those evil beings—they hate and want to torture their own followers! The fallen nature of these beings is obvious—the passage is framed with the beings of the “abyss” (9:1, 11), and the locusts ascend like smoke from the pit. The message is clear: demonic powers are behind all idolatry, and their purpose is

Additional Notes

8:13. Many late manuscripts (P 1 680 2059 2060 2081 2186 et al.) read ἀγγέλου instead of ἄετοῦ. However, the manuscript evidence in favor of ἄετοῦ (א A 046 most minuscules it^gig,^h TR) is very strong and diverse, and that is the more likely reading. Metzger (1994: 669) believes the substitution could be a reading error or deliberate, since the function of the “eagle” here is normally done by an angel in this book.

9:5. Chilton (1987: 244–45) gives us a preterist interpretation of the locust plague, saying the “five months” refers not only to a five-month period (from May through September) when locusts appeared but also to a five-month reign of terror on the part of Gessius Florus. In May A.D. 66, he began by slaughtering 3,600 Jewish citizens, then systematically provoked the Jewish people, seeking to “incite them to rebellion.” His success in doing so is seen in that Josephus (*J.W.* 2.14.9–19.9 §§305–555) says this was the beginning of the Jewish War. While this may form part of the background, it does not fit all the imagery. In the Apocalypse this is a worldwide conflagration that cannot be limited just to the environs of the Jewish world. It is all those who do not have “the seal of God” (v. 4), not just the unbelieving among the Jews.

9:11. Some (e.g., Hendriksen 1967: 145–46) see the locust plague and the “angel of the abyss” in a completely symbolic way as symptomatic of all the demonic “plagues” inflicted on humankind, such as drugs, pornography, the black plague, AIDS, and other evils that are part of a fallen world. While those are certainly demonic plagues, it is difficult to take this passage in so general a way. Of course, much depends on whether one takes an idealist or a futurist approach to the book (see the introduction). The idealist would see this as purely symbolic of Satan’s activity between the advents, while a futurist would see this more literally. I interpret this primarily as a reference to demonic activity in the last epoch of world history (commonly understood as the “tribulation period”) but with secondary significance for the church of John’s day and the church today. Satan has always desired to torment his own followers. As has been said throughout, the reader is not supposed to ask how this will work itself out on the plane of human history. Will there actually be a locust plague followed by 200 million demonic horsemen galloping across the earth? We will have to wait and see. This is a literal event, but how literal it will be is up to God, who has given us few clues in this incredible book. For a good summary, see Gregg (1997: 174–85).

d. Sixth Trumpet (9:12–21)

What began in the first woe (the war of the demons against the earth-dwellers) will come to completion in the second. We move from torture to death, and a third of humankind will die. The plagues are similar in some respects. The organization of this event is much the same, with the release of the angels in 9:13–16 (= 9:1–6) followed by their description in 9:17–19 (= 9:7–10). The description of the locusts (9:7–10) employed the warhorse, and the demonic cavalry is but an extension of that. Also, both the locusts and the horses inflict harm with their tails, though the tails of the demonic cavalry are snakes (9:19b), and the horses in the second plague also inflict harm with their “mouths” (9:19a). Finally, God is still in control, and it is his plan, not Satan’s, that is moving to completion. At the same time, it is also connected to the first four seals, specifically the “sword, famine, and plague” that killed one-fourth of humanity (6:8). This not only intensifies the results of the seals but also intensifies the process. In chapter 6 depraved humans went to war against one another, while here demonic powers go to war against depraved humans and kill them. Yet with all this, with the natural disasters of the first four trumpets, the supernatural torment of the fifth trumpet, and the horrible demonic cavalry that produces the greatest death count in the history of this world, people will still reject the God of the universe and refuse to repent. As Mounce (1998: 193) says well, “Nowhere will you find a more accurate picture of sinful humanity pressed to the extreme. One would think that the terrors of God’s wrath would bring rebels to their knees. Not so. Past the point of no return, they respond to greater punishment with increased rebellion. Such is sinful nature untouched and unmoved by the mercies of God.” There could be no more tragic picture of human depravity.

- i. Introduction/second woe (9:12)
- ii. Release of the four angels (9:13–16)
- iii. Description of demonic warhorses (9:17–19)
- iv. Rejection and refusal to repent (9:20–21)

Exegesis and Exposition

¹²The first woe has passed. Behold, two woes are yet to come after this.

¹³The sixth angel sounded his trumpet, and I heard a voice from the horns of the golden altar in the presence of God. ¹⁴He said to the sixth angel who had the trumpet, “Release the four angels who have been bound in the great river Euphrates.” ¹⁵And the four angels who had been made ready for this hour and day and month and year were turned loose so that they could kill a third of humankind. And the troops of cavalry numbered two hundred million. I heard their number. ¹⁷In my vision I saw the horses and their riders as follows: They had breastplates that were fiery red, dusky blue, and sulfurous yellow. The heads of the horses resembled the heads of lions, and fire, smoke, and sulfur were coming out of their mouths. ¹⁸A third of humankind was killed by these three plagues of fire and of smoke and of sulfur that were coming out of their mouths. ¹⁹The power of the horses was in their mouths and in their tails, for their tails resembled snakes, having heads, and they hurt (people) with them.

²⁰The rest of humankind that were not killed by these plagues refused to repent of the works of their hands, that they should not worship demons, namely the idols of gold and silver and bronze and wood and stone, that can neither see nor hear nor walk.

²¹And they did “not” repent of their murders, their “magic arts”, their immorality, or their thefts.

i. Introduction/Second Woe (9:12)

While most place this verse with 9:1–11, a study of the three “woe” texts (8:13; 9:12; 11:14) shows

clearly that each introduces the following woe.^[1] There is a transition in the second and third from the preceding trumpet judgment (“behold, . . . is now past”), but primarily it introduces the following trumpet judgment as a “woe oracle.” This verse has a powerful rhetorical force, for it makes the reader more aware of these plagues as judgments (“woe”) from God and highlights each one as a separate entity rather than allowing the reader to think of them as a whole. The reader now knows that the first special judgment upon the kingdom of evil is over, and there is another still to come. The verbs almost personify the woes as travelers, with the first “departing” so the others might “come.” The emphasis is on the imminent arrival of the others “soon after this.”^[2]

ii. Release of the Four Angels (9:13–16)

As the sixth trumpet sounds, John “hears” **φωνὴν μίαν** (*phōnēn mian*, a^[3] voice) coming “from the horns of the golden altar in the presence of God.” This mysterious voice is not identified, but it comes from the “horns of the altar” and cannot be God’s (contra Beasley-Murray 1978: 163), because this is done “in the presence of God.” It could be the voice of the saints continuing to pray for vengeance from the altar (6:9–11; 8:3–5), but that is difficult (contra Swete 1911: 120) in light of the singular “a voice” (unless **φωνήν** is identified as a collective noun; see below for the connection with 6:10; 8:3–4). It is probably better to see it as angelic, possibly the angel who presented the prayers of the saints to God on the golden altar in 8:3–5 (the phrasing of the “golden altar before God” is virtually identical). This is the only mention in Revelation of “the horns of the golden altar,” and 6:9, 8:3, and here are the only times the “altar” appears. As in 8:3 this refers to the altar of incense, and the “horns” (Exod. 30:1–10; 37:25) were protuberances at the four corners of the altar that signified the strength and power of Yahweh.

That this voice comes “from”^[4] these horns is similar to 14:18 (where an angel “comes from the altar” with a command), 16:7 (where the altar responds to the angel of the waters), and 19:5 (where a “voice from the throne” speaks). In all four instances the divine imprimatur behind the message is stressed. In other words, God himself is speaking directly through the intermediary. This is probably why an angel is not mentioned in any of the three instances, to emphasize even more strongly God’s sovereign presence behind the commands. In each of these contexts the command from the “altar” also provides a strong link with the action of the angel on behalf of the prayers of the saints at “the golden altar” in 8:3–5. In other words, this terrible judgment again is God’s response to the prayers of the saints (6:10) as offered to God by the angel of the altar (8:3–4) for vengeance. In 8:5 the angel gives the first response by hurling the censer to earth and initiating the trumpet judgments. Here the same angel gives a second response and initiates the final stage by commanding that the death angels be released.

The angel of the altar gives God’s command to the very angel that sounded the sixth trumpet. This is the only time one of the trumpet or bowl angels participates in the event they inaugurate, so this too adds rhetorical power to the scene. The heraldic angel is told to “release the four angels.” We do not know their identity, but they are connected to the “four angels” (see 7:1 for background) who are holding back the four winds of destruction in 7:1.^[5] There the destructive forces were restrained, but here they are released from their restraints. Four such angels are not found in apocalyptic tradition, but as noted in 7:1, the literature did discuss four destructive forces (or angels) that were held at the corners of the earth. These terrible forces are to be unleashed by God to do their devastating work. The question as to whether these are good angels or bad is not stated directly in the text. However, that they are **δεδεμένους** (*dedemenous*, bound) favors the view that they are demonic (so also Morris, Roloff, Giesen, Beale; contra Wall, Aune [who links these

with the four angels of 7:1]), for Satan is “bound” by Jesus in the programmatic statement on the “binding of Satan” in Mark 3:27, and he is “bound” in the abyss in Rev. 20:2. Also, there seems to be a close connection between the four angels and the 200 million horsemen of 9:16. These angels could be the leaders of the demonic cavalry (so Beckwith 1919: 566).

In 1 Enoch 56.5–57.3, the “angels of punishment” (56.1; cf. 53.3; 62.11) turn to the east to the Parthians and Medes and get them to attack Israel. This is very similar, for these angels are “bound at the great river Euphrates.” The Euphrates was the eastern boundary of the Roman Empire, and on the other side were the dreaded Parthians. The Parthians had defeated Roman armies in 53 B.C. and A.D. 62 and were looking for opportunities for further plunder at the expense of Rome. Thus once more the Parthians figure as background (see 6:2). The Euphrates was also important in the OT. It was one of the rivers flowing out of the Garden of Eden (Gen. 2:14), and in Gen. 15:18 God made a covenant with Abraham and gave him and his descendants the land from the Nile to the Euphrates. In Isa. 8:7 the Assyrian invaders are pictured as “the mighty floodwaters of the River.” Many of the terrible invasions of Palestine—by the Assyrians, Babylonians, Persians—came across the Euphrates. Thus it became not only the eastern boundary first of Israel and then of Rome but also a symbol of foreign invasion. This judgment also prepares for the sixth bowl (16:12), in which the Euphrates is dried up “to prepare the way for the kings of the east,” again built upon the Parthians. As Caird (1966: 122) notes, “All the scriptural warnings about a foe from the north, therefore, find their echo in John’s bloodcurdling vision” (Isa. 14:31; Jer. 1:14–15; 6:1, 22; 10:22; 13:20; 25:9, 26; 46:20, 24; 47:2; Ezek. 26:7; 38:6, 15; 39:2).

In another emphasis on divine sovereignty, John tells us that these angels had been ἡτοιμασμένοι^[6] (*hētoimasmēnoi*, made ready, prepared—another divine passive) by God “for this very hour and day and month and year.” In 6:11 the martyred saints were told to be patient until the number of those to be killed was complete. There and here the divinely chosen moment for their vindication is stressed. Another moment (see also 6:15–17) that God had chosen to “avenge their blood” (6:10) has arrived. In 9:7 the locusts look like horses “made ready” for battle, and here also the four “angels of punishment” are “made ready” for an even more terrible kind of war. ἡτοιμασμένοι is used in the NT for the two divinely “prepared” eternal habitations in Matt. 25:34 (the kingdom “prepared”) and Matt. 25:41 (the eternal fire “prepared”) as well as for God’s salvation (Luke 2:30–31), eschatological blessings (1 Cor. 2:9), and final reward (Mark 10:40). Hence it is a major term for God’s predestined will. The four time designations are connected by a single article, showing they all relate to the exact moment God has set, and they are in ascending order (hour-day-month-year) to highlight this specific point of time.^[7] God’s precise determination of the exact time of the eschaton is another feature of apocalyptic. First Enoch 92.2 states that God “has designated [specific] days for all things,” and 2 Esdr. (4 Ezra) 7:39–43 states that the day of judgment will have “no sun or moon or stars . . . or moon or night” (i.e., a time belonging only to God; cf. 2 Esdr. [4 Ezra] 4:39ff.; Sib. Or. 2.325–27; 2 Enoch 33.1–2).

Repeating the λύω (*lyō*, release) of Rev. 9:14, John now tells us the purpose (ἵνα, *hina*, in order that) for their release, to “kill a third of humankind.” In 7:3 the four angels who had “power to harm the land or the sea” were restrained “until we have put a seal on the foreheads of God’s slaves.” The saints have now been sealed, and it is time to “release” the forces of destruction. This culminates the whole movement of the trumpets. The first four affected the natural order, and with the third trumpet judgment, Wormwood, we learned that “many people died” (8:11). The fifth trumpet caused the earth-dwellers to writhe in the agony of torture for five months, and many sought death (9:6). All this culminates here, as a third of the world’s population perishes, more

than the accumulated deaths of all the wars of the twentieth century put together (in today's numbers, over two billion dead)! The effect of the seals was the death of a quarter of the population; now this intensifies to a third. As before, the purpose even of such mass destruction is redemptive. This is a warning to "the rest of humankind not killed by these plagues" that they must get right with God or else. While not stated here, it is obvious in the larger context that only those who have rejected God are the subject of this second "woe plague" ("earth-dwellers" in 8:13 and those without "the seal of God" in 9:4). The saints as before are protected from this judgment (3:10; 7:1–8; 9:4).

The four angels immediately upon release somehow metamorphose into a horrendous cavalry 200 million strong, literally *δισμυριάδες μυριάδων* (*dismyriades myriadōn*, two myriads of myriads) or $2 \times 10,000 \times 10,000$.^[8] In 5:11 the number of angels worshiping God is stated as "myriads of myriads" (see the OT background there), and this doubles that number. The Roman army in the first century was composed of twenty-five legions or about 125,000 soldiers, and they had an auxiliary army of comparable size (see Lane, *BEB* 1:197). This was a thousand times that number, and that fact would not go unnoticed by the first-century reader.^[9] While the description (9:17–19) centers entirely on the horses, this describes them as "the number of the troops of cavalry," picturing mounted cavalry. Like chariots, cavalry were greatly feared instruments of war in the ancient world. The Parthians were particularly famed for their prowess as cavalry (see on 6:2), and the readers in the Roman province of Asia would undoubtedly think of them. Thus this unbelievably huge and terrifying demonic cavalry^[10] would be an unstoppable force. Only God could keep the number of the dead to only a third of humankind.

John adds, "I heard the number," pointing to prophetic activity on his part. Wherever he uses ἤκουσα (*ēkousa*, I heard), it refers to prophetic and visionary material he is given from above (e.g., 1:10; 4:1; 5:11; 6:1; etc.). Possibly, a voice in the vision itself told him. John does not normally state such things (note also "I saw in my vision" in the next verse). He probably does so because this particular vision is so astounding that he feels he must tell his readers that he actually saw and heard these things. This is important when responding to those who say this is merely a literary work, John's own creation; he claims he specifically "saw" and "heard" these things. He is not making up the details.

iii. Description of Demonic Warhorses (9:17–19)

There are close parallels between the descriptions of the demonic locust swarm (9:7–10) and of the demonic cavalry (9:17–19). In both there is the central figure of the warhorse and the grotesque supernatural appearance of the beings. Both are clearly demonic and bent on torment and destruction, with the infliction of suffering coming from their tails. John begins this section with εἶδον . . . ἐν τῇ ὁράσει (*eidon . . . en tē horasei*, I saw . . . in my vision), an unusual phrase found only here in the book. It is common to believe it is added to indicate that this vision is "highly symbolic in nature" (Mounce 1998: 196; see also Morris 1987: 131). That is doubtful, however, for it is not more symbolic than the fifth trumpet or the bowls. It is important to realize that the two primary terms for John's participation in the visions, "I heard" and "I saw," are found in successive clauses at the end of 9:16 and the beginning of 9:17. The added "in a vision" simply makes explicit what has been implicit in the many occurrences of these phrases (they are found together in 4:1; 5:11; 6:1, 5; 8:13; 14:13–14). Therefore, as stated in 9:16, John emphasizes this section by reminding the reader that he really "heard" and "saw" these things "in a vision" sent by God. When it refers to material that follows, οὕτως (*houtōs*) means "in this way" or "as follows." Therefore, it is best to translate,

“In my vision I saw the horses and their riders as follows: They had. . . .”

The strange order, in which “their riders” seems to be placed last for emphasis, could mean that the breastplates were on the riders rather than the horses (so Swete, Johnson, Sweet), though others have seen the breastplates on the horses because they are the primary focus in 9:17–19 (Beasley-Murray 1978: 165). It is more likely, however, that both horse and rider have breastplates (Beckwith 1919: 568; Thomas 1995: 47). The horselike locusts wore breastplates, and this description seems to be an intensification of that vision. Also, the Parthian cavalry was noted for both horse and rider being covered with bright armor, and they probably provide the background for this vision (see above). These breastplates are πυρίνους καὶ ὑακινθίνους καὶ θειώδεις (*pyrinous kai hyakinthinous kai theiōdeis*, of fire and hyacinth and brimstone), which may be genitives of material (see Wallace 1996: 91–92) detailing the actual materials they are made of (some made of fire, some of hyacinth, some of brimstone; so Swete 1911: 123) but more likely are descriptive genitives, telling the colors of the breastplates. Πυρίνους would be fiery red in color, ὑακινθίνους a “dusky blue color as of sulphurous smoke” (MM 647), and θειώδεις a sulphurlike yellow. It is impossible to know whether all the breastplates had these three colors intertwined, or whether some were red, some blue, and some yellow. We do know that these colors correspond to the “fire, smoke, and sulfur” of 9:17b–18 and describe the terrifying nature of this demonic cavalry. Their whole purpose was fire and destruction.

While the teeth of the locusts were “like lions’ teeth,” it is the “heads” of the horses that “resembled the heads of lions.” The reason is probably that in 9:19 their “power” is in their “mouths” as well as their “tails,” and it is the mouth of the lion that allows it to tear apart its prey. The majestic and terrible visage of a lion is a natural image for this incredible army, since it was the most vicious beast known to the ancient people of the Mediterranean. The “head” here seems to combine the other metaphoric uses in this central section: their teeth (9:8), their roar (10:3), and their mouth (13:2). All of these produce terror, and that seems to be the emphasis here.

Out of the mouths of these “lionlike” creatures comes πῦρ καὶ καπνὸς καὶ θεῖον (*pyr kai kapnos kai theion*, fire and smoke and sulfur [brimstone]).^[11] These correspond to the three colors earlier in the verse and show that these monsters are truly from the pits of hell. This could also be an echo of Job 41:19–20, where fire and smoke “shoot out” from the mouth and nostrils of Leviathan, the monster of the deep (the abyss). Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed by “burning sulfur” that was “rained down” by God, and the result was “dense smoke . . . like smoke from a furnace” (Gen. 19:28). Fire, burning sulfur, and smoke became a sign of divine judgment (Ps. 11:6; Isa. 30:33; Ezek. 38:22), as did Sodom and Gomorrah (Luke 17:29; Jude 7). In the rest of Revelation “burning sulfur” always refers to the eternal fires of judgment (14:10), especially the “fiery lake of burning sulfur” (19:20; 20:10; 21:8), and “smoke” also signifies the judgment of God (14:11; 18:9, 18; 19:3). Here this judgment is sent from God via the demonic hordes that have become his instrument of judgment, and there is great irony in the demonic forces breathing out the same “fire, smoke, and sulfur” that will become their own eternal torment (19:20; 20:10). In one sense this summarizes the other trumpet judgments, for the first three trumpets involved fire (8:7, 8, 10) while the fifth involves smoke (9:2, 3; see Michaels 1997: 131). At the same time, it is a parody or imitation of Christ, namely of the sword that proceeds from his mouth in judgment (1:16; 2:16; 19:15, 21). The demonic hordes copy the method of judgment exercised by Christ. This is another of the dominant themes of the book, the imitation of the work of God and the Lamb by the dragon, the beast, and their demonic hordes (see the introduction to this commentary).

John considers the “fire, smoke, and sulfur” to be three separate plagues by describing them as

ἀπὸ τῶν τριῶν πληγῶν τούτων . . . ἐκ[12] τοῦ πυρὸς καὶ τοῦ καπνοῦ καὶ τοῦ θείου (*apo tōn triōn plēgōn toutōn . . . ek tou pyros kai tou kapnou kai tou theiou*, from these three plagues . . . of fire and of smoke and of sulfur). The repetition of the article and entitling them “these three plagues” makes definite that each has a separate role to play. The exact role of each is never stated, however, and it is poor hermeneutics to try to see them as prophetic of modern weapons of war like tanks, planes, or nuclear missiles. John was thinking of ancient warfare, and the terrible fire and smoke caused by the siege engines of the Roman army. By giving each a separate place John is trying to capture the terrible devastation of the demonic cavalry as it goes to war against the peoples of the earth. The result is the death of one-third of humankind (see 9:15).

The reason why (γάρ, *gar*, for) a third of humankind dies lies in the “mouths” and “tails” of the demonic cavalry. As in 9:3, 10, God has given them (this is implicit from 9:3) ἐξουσία (*exousia*, authority or power).[13] This “power” resides in two places: their “mouths” refers back to 9:17c and to the “fire, smoke, and sulfur” that poured out of them, and their “tails” refers forward to “snakes” that hurt people. It seems clear that their mouths are the destructive force, doing the actual killing (9:17c), while the tails ἀδικοῦσιν (*adikousin*, injure) people. This replicates the “injury” inflicted on these people by the locust plague (9:4, 10, where the same verb is employed) and continues the theme of the demonic lust to torture and kill all who were created in the image of God. Here we see a great reversal. In Luke 10:19 Jesus gave the disciples “authority to trample on snakes and scorpions,” while in the fifth and sixth trumpets God gives the scorpions and snakes “authority” to harm the earth-dwellers.

Another strong image occurs when their tails are ὅμοιαι ὀφείσιν (*homoiai ophesin*, like snakes), because Satan is called “the ancient ὄφι” in 12:9 (cf. also 12:14, 15; 20:2). In Gen. 3:1–7 the “crafty serpent” deceived Eve into eating the forbidden fruit, and although that serpent is not connected with Satan explicitly in Gen. 3, Jewish apocalyptic equated them (Apoc. Mos. 16; 3 Bar. 9.6–8). Snakes were given a demonic force in Egyptian and Persian religions. Thus the presence of a snake at the tip of the tail “injuring” people was a universal picture of demonic activity in the ancient world. Some (Caird 1966: 122; Mounce 1998: 197) link this with Gog and Magog (Ezek. 38–39), for there too an invasion from without causes terrible devastation. While there is no direct literary dependence, the parallel is viable, and Gog and Magog will be utilized directly in 20:8 and hinted at in 19:11–21 for the final battles against Satan.

iv. Rejection and Refusal to Repent (9:20–21)

This is the conclusion not only of the sixth trumpet judgment but also of the whole section. Each of the judgments has proven the omnipotence of God over the evil gods of this world and has also shown the nations that they cannot depend on the things of this world, which will turn on them. The allusions to the Egyptian plagues and to the day of Yahweh from Joel 1–2 demonstrated that only God has ultimate power and is worthy of allegiance. Yet human depravity is powerful, and the message is rejected. John tells us that “the rest of humankind not killed” refuse to repent but instead prefer to worship the idols that were the tools of the very demonic forces that had tortured and killed them. Idolatry was a major focus of the seven letters, especially because the cult movement of the Nicolaitans (2:2, 6, 15) featured participation in idolatry (2:14, 20). This would be a distinct warning to those foolish quasi-Christians against such practices.

There is some debate as to whether the phrase “these plagues” refers generally to all the trumpet judgments or specifically to the “three plagues of fire, smoke, and sulfur” of verse 18. It is tempting to take this generally since the Egyptian plagues are behind the first four trumpet

judgments, and “many people died” in the third one (8:11). However, *πληγή* (*plēgē*, plague) does not appear in the trumpet judgments until 9:18, 20, so it is most likely that “these plagues” are those of 9:18. These plagues of destruction have killed a third of humanity, yet they have not effected the repentance that God has sought. The demons have demonstrated their contempt and hatred for the nations, but rather than turn to the God of mercy, the unbelievers turn once more to their idols and their sinful practices.

There is an emphatic *οὐδὲ μετενόησαν ἐκ* (*oude metenoēsan ek*, not repent of), for this is the only place in the book where *οὐδέ* negates a verb. When it does so it usually means “not even,” thus it is best to translate this “refused to repent.” While the call to repentance is frequent in the seven letters (2:5, 16, 21, 22; 3:3, 19), it occurs only in 9:20, 21; 16:9, 11 outside the letters. Moreover, the seven letters address churches that need to get right with God, while these last four call on unbelievers to “repent” and find salvation. This is one of the purposes of the seals, trumpets, and bowls—to give a final offer of salvation to the nations (contra Beale, Aune, [14] Schnabel) and to demonstrate the depravity of a people who would reject it. However, here they would not turn from their sinful practices and embrace God’s offer of eternal life, for they preferred “the works of their hands.” While this could be taken generally to mean all the things of this world “made by hand,” it most likely refers to idols, as it does often in the OT (Deut. 4:28; 27:15; 2 Kings 19:18; Ps. 115:4; Isa. 2:8; 17:8; Jer. 1:16; Mic. 5:13).

Scripture often calls idolatry demon worship. [15] Deuteronomy 32:16–17 talks about Israel’s unfaithfulness: “They made him jealous with their foreign gods and angered him with their detestable idols. They sacrificed to demons, which are not God” (cf. Ps. 106:37; Jub. 11.4). Paul built on this and said two things of idol worship: first, an idol is nothing, that is, it has no life in and of itself (1 Cor. 8:4); second, “the sacrifices of pagans are offered to demons, not to God” (1 Cor. 10:20 NIV). While an idol is dead, not alive, the powers behind idolatry are demonic in nature. Such is the paradox regarding idolatry, the major opponent of biblical religion throughout the biblical period. On the one hand idols are lifeless things made of “gold, silver, bronze, stone, and wood.” John is explicit here, naming every kind of material used in the ancient world to make idols. He would have seen such everywhere he went, for the Greco-Roman world was extremely superstitious. Paul related that in Athens he had even seen a statue “to an unknown god” (Acts 17:23), so named to make certain no god was unrepresented and therefore angry at the Athenians due to their neglect. To make sure the point is made properly, John also tells us these idols *οὔτε βλέπειν δύνανται οὔτε ἀκούειν οὔτε περιπατεῖν* (*oute blepein dynantai oute akoueîn oute peripateîn*, have no power [16] either to see or hear or walk). The present tenses mean that they at no time have the power of life. This is an echo of Ps. 115:4–7, “their idols are silver and gold, made by the hands of men. They have mouths but cannot speak, eyes, but they cannot see; they have ears, but they cannot hear; . . . feet, but they cannot walk” (cf. Ps. 135:17; Jer. 10:1–16; Dan. 5:4, 23; Hab. 2:18–19; 1 Enoch 99.7; Sib. Or. 5.77–79). On the other hand, behind the lifeless idols are cosmic forces of frightening power, for they are the minions of the “god of this world” (2 Cor. 4:4), “the ruler of the kingdom of the air” (Eph. 2:2). They have turned against their own followers, but those foolish people of this world would rather “worship” the demons that have so mistreated them than turn to the God of love and “repent.”

The idol worship of Rev. 9:20 is followed by the unrighteous deeds of 9:21. Vice lists like this were common in the Hellenistic and Jewish worlds (e.g., Wis. 14:25–26). Paul used them frequently to demonstrate the depravity of the pagan world and to warn believers of the danger of such practices (Rom. 1:29–31; 13:13; 1 Cor. 5:9–11; Gal. 5:19–21; Eph. 4:25–32; 5:3–5). In the vice lists of

Revelation both purposes are present, with the list here and in 22:15 stressing the depravity of the unrepentant and that of 21:8 a warning to “cowardly” members of the church. The list here follows the contours of the Ten Commandments (Exod. 20:1–17), particularly the second (idolatry), the sixth (murder), the seventh (adultery), and the eighth (theft). In addition, idolatry and immorality were the major vices of the Nicolaitan cult (Rev. 2:14, 20–22).

Φάρμακον (*pharmakon*, magic) can mean “medicine” or even “poison” in certain contexts but here refers to the use of “magic potions” in religious rites in the Greco-Roman world. It is interesting that John did not use the more general term **λαρμακεία** (*pharmakeia*) for “sorcery” or “magic” but rather chose the term that describes the potions used in the rites. John wants to condemn not just the general practice of magic but everything involved in it (i.e., the paraphernalia as well as the rite itself).^[17] Magic was a major problem for early Christianity. One of the signs of victory over paganism occurred when the sorcerers at Ephesus burned their magic scrolls in public (Acts 19:19). Paul listed “idolatry and witchcraft” together as “acts of the sinful nature” (Gal. 5:19–20), for most acts of “sorcery” occurred in the atmosphere of idolatrous worship (note again the connection of idolatry and demonic activity). In the Apocalypse, using magic is how Babylon “led the nations astray” (18:23), and all who practice it will be cast into the lake of fire (21:8; cf. 22:15). In the first century magic was based on the belief that both good and evil spirits (called gods) involved themselves in the affairs of people. Using religious rituals involving incantations and “commands” given to the spirit-gods, people would try to get the “gods” to work on their behalf, such as for success in business or athletics, sexual liaisons, or healing (see Arnold, *DLNT* 701–4). Aune (1987: 481–501) argues that one of the major purposes of John in this book is to counter the prevalence of magic at Ephesus and the province of Asia and to present Jesus as the answer to all such demonic acts.

Summary and Contextualization

The fifth and sixth seals—the locust plague torturing the nations and the demonic horsemen killing them—are closely intertwined. The entire desire of the fallen angels is to torture and kill all who are made in the image of God. Yet the great sadness here is that depraved humanity is so ensnared and deceived that they fail to realize this truth and rush after sin recklessly. The unsaved are shown to be controlled by their own depravity. These horrible events will prove to the nations beyond a shadow of a doubt that God is supreme, that the demonic forces hate them, and that God is giving them a final chance to repent. Yet they not only reject God’s offer but prefer to worship the very demons who have so mistreated them and to practice the very magic arts that God has just shown to be powerless. Thus we see once more the theodicy of the book, justifying the redemptive love of God and the justice of his judgments (see Osborne 1993: 63–77). The great white throne judgment and the lake of fire (20:11–15) are the only proper responses in the light of overwhelming depravity.

The message for John’s day and for our day is clear. We must help believer and unbeliever alike to realize what is at stake. Idolatry in our society is not so obvious but is just as real as it was in John’s day. By definition idolatry is turning an earthly thing into a god and worshiping it rather than the God of creation. Whatever we place ahead of God in our lives is our idol. Therefore, the modern world is replete with idols: money, possessions, power, pleasure, sex, success, fame, drugs. These are all tools of Satan, and there are countless stories in which these very things have tortured and killed those who pursue them. We must warn people of the cosmic powers in

control of this secular world and call them to God. As Kroll (1989: 207–8) points out, there is a diatribe against secular culture embedded in the narrative here. John “offers an alternative vision to the glorification of Greco-Roman cultural achievements which were lauded by many of his contemporaries. . . . God will utilize the world’s own spiritual-demonic forces and resources and thereby reveal the world’s absurdity.” This is every bit as true today. Those who buy into secular culture and secular ways are headed for divine judgment. There is still a chance to repent, but no one knows when the time will run out. Soon the period described here might begin, and time is short.

John’s purpose is not to give an apocalyptic timetable for his own day or ours. It is wrong to look for events in John’s day that fulfilled these images (like Parthian invasions or the destruction of Pompeii by the eruption of Mount Vesuvius), and it is wrong to look for equivalents in our day (like helicopters or tanks). These are symbolic depictions of future events but with theological messages for the present, and that is how we must study them.

Additional Notes

9:13. [ΤΕΣΣΑΡΩΝ] ΚΕΡΑΤΩΝ: The external evidence for the inclusion of ΤΕΣΣΑΡΩΝ (P 046 1 1006 11828 ^{it}^{dem} et al.) is nearly equal to that for its exclusion (□⁴⁷ ^a A 0207 94 1611 2053 ^{itar,c,div,gig,haf,a} et al.). Metzger (1994: 670) correctly surmises that while it could have been accidentally omitted due to similarity with ΚΕΡΑΤΩΝ, it could also have been added to provide an antithesis with ΙΩΝΗΝ ΜΙΑΝ. Thomas (1995: 50) is probably correct that the omission is the more difficult reading and therefore likely. Since all knew the altar had four horns, it would be more likely for a scribe to add it than to omit it.

9:16. From a preterist perspective (see also note on 9:5) Ford (1975b: 154) and Chilton (1987: 252–55) interpret the mounted invasion by an innumerable host as the Roman invasion that began in A.D. 66. It was led by the legate Cestius with a large number of cavalry that originally came from the area near the Euphrates (9:14). The Roman forces ravaged the countryside for some time and then laid siege to Jerusalem. They were about to win their way into the city when Cestius inexplicably withdrew, with the Zealots pursuing and inflicting large casualties on the Romans. This gave the rebels new hope and changed the battle into a lengthy war. By A.D. 70 the Jews had lost thousands to the invincible Romans but still listened to the false prophets, refused to surrender, and fought to the bitter end (9:20–21). Not only had Jesus prophesied the terrible events (Mark 13 par.), but also God had sent several signs, like a bright light around the altar and temple at the Feast of Unleavened Bread (Josephus, J.W. 6.5.3 §290), the temple gate opening inexplicably (it normally took twenty people to do so, J.W. 6.5.3 §293), and several other signs that were taken at the time as warnings. This is an interesting parallel but does not account for the cosmic overtones of the passage, for instance, one-third of humankind dying. Also, the vice list of verse 21 goes beyond Jewish rejection of the Messiah and reflects a pagan list of sins. Thus while the events of A.D. 66–70 might well provide background for the details here, they are not the whole meaning of the passage.

9:19. ὅμοιοι ὄφειν: There have been many interpretations of “their tails were like snakes” (see Beckwith, Moffatt, Mounce, Aune): (1) the image could stem from the altar of Zeus at Pergamum, called “Satan’s throne” in 2:13; in the huge sculpture the legs of the giants were snakes. (2) The mythical *amphisbaena* had snakes at both ends. (3) The Parthian warriors would weave the tails of their horses in such a way that they looked like snakes, and they were especially skilled at shooting arrows not only as they rode toward a foe but also as they rode away from them, so that the arrows seemed to come from the tails of the horses. (4) The Turkish pashas used horsetails as symbols of authority. Of these, the most likely background would be the Parthian warriors due to their presence elsewhere as background for imagery in chapter 9. I must say once more, however, that this is not a reference to Parthians; rather, John is using them as symbolic background for his picture of the demonic hordes here.

9:21. Because of the clumsiness of having οὐδέ negate the verb, several scribes substituted οὐ (C 94 1006 1828 et al. [καὶ οὐ in 2329 ^{syr^{ph}}, ^h Tyconius]). Others have οὔτε (A P 1 1611 2053 ^{comm} 2065 et al.), probably due to assimilation with its use later in the verse (see Metzger 1971: 742; omitted from the apparatus of UBS⁴).

9:21. Some manuscripts have the more general Ιαρμακεία (or Ιαρμακία; so A P 046 2053 2344 et al.), probably because it is the more expected term, and this is the only place in the NT Ιάρμακον is found. However, the manuscript evidence for Ιάρμακον is quite strong (□⁴⁷ ^a C 1006 1611 1854 et al.), and the harder (i.e., rarer) reading is preferable.

e. Interlude: Prophecy and Witness (10:1–11:13)

Like chapter 7, this interlude^[1] clarifies the role of the saints in the events of the seals, trumpets, and bowls and has two parts: the eating of the little scroll (10:1–11) and the ministry of the two witnesses (11:1–13), with a small narrative interspersed (11:1–2). The single theme that more than any other runs through this section is that of prophecy. As Aune (1998a: 555, following Giblin) brings out, a major connective link between chapters 10 and 11 is the prophetic actions of 10:8–10 and 11:1–2, part of the “prophecy motif” in both sections. The only previous mention was in 1:3, where the book is called a “prophecy” (apart from the mention of Jezebel the self-styled “prophetess” in 2:20). Yet here three terms for prophetic activity occur a total of five times (10:7, 11; 11:3, 6, 10; cf. 11:18). Interestingly, in 10:11 John is commanded to “prophesy again” even though he was not commissioned as a prophet earlier. The “again” probably refers to 1:19, where John was told to “write what you have seen and what is and what must occur after these things.” This prophetic role involved more than the seven letters; it concerned the visions of the whole book. Here that prophetic commission is renewed, and what is even more striking is that this is the only interval section in which John is involved in the narrative. This is clearly a pivotal part of the book. God is involving John in his revelatory activity, calling on John to join in God’s mission to the world, a mission that the two witnesses will also join in their prophetic activity (11:3, 6, 10). The first half of Revelation (1:1–11:19) is framed with prophetic witness (1:9–20; 10:1–11:13).

The second major theme is that of the “little scroll” in chapter 10 as it recapitulates and carries on the theme of the “scroll” in chapter 5 (note also that the “mighty angel” appears in 5:2 and 10:1, further linking the two chapters). It is likely that the scrolls of chapters 5 and 10 are one and the same (see the discussion in 10:2), and therefore there are further connections between these chapters. Bauckham (1993b: 257–58) elaborates on this motif of prophetic witness by detailing four themes in chapters 4–9 that have prepared for this interlude: (1) On the basis of the sovereignty of God in chapter 4, the scroll relates the establishment of God’s kingdom on earth. (2) The Lamb’s victory has led to the constitution of the church as “a kingdom and priests” (5:9–10), and so the church will be involved in the establishment of God’s kingdom. (3) The church is drawn from “all nations” (7:9) and is delivered from the world through martyrdom, and chapter 10 will reveal more about this call to martyrdom. (4) Since the limited judgments of the seals and trumpets failed to bring humankind to repentance (9:20–21), the scroll will provide “a more effective strategy” for reaching the world. While Bauckham has overstated the place of martyrdom in this (it is the witnessing church, and not just the martyred church, that is victorious), he sees correctly that a major purpose of this interlude is indeed the conversion of the nations. Many are converted in 11:13b, the only place in the book where this occurs.

The believers are the focus of this section (as well as in the next interlude of chaps. 12–14), symbolized by John in chapter 10 and by the two witnesses of chapter 11. Thus they witness and suffer, leading to vindication and victory. In 7:1–8 and 9:4 they were sealed and protected from the judgments poured out on the earth, but in 11:7 the witnesses are “conquered” by the beast (the Antichrist), the same term as in 13:7, where the beast is given permission to “conquer” the saints. Thus this tells us that the Christians are protected from God’s wrath but not from the beast’s wrath. Yet this is no defeat, for martyrdom is victory in this book. The beast believes he is conquering the saints; instead he is conquered by the saints, specifically because “they did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death” (12:11).

Finally, this interlude introduces us to the so-called great tribulation, mentioned by name only in 7:14 but described initially here. In 11:2, 3 we are introduced to the period of “42 months” (v. 2) and “1,260 days” (v. 3) that dominates ensuing chapters (12:6, 14; 13:5) and seemingly depicts the time of the final conflict. Also, the “beast” is introduced in 11:7 but not explained until chapter 13. This term (“great tribulation”) looks at the period from the perspective of the Christians, who are hounded to their deaths by the followers of the beast (the events behind the cry for vengeance in 6:9–11). It is not a coincidence that these time references are restricted to chapters 11–13, texts that focus on the part the saints will play in the final conflict.

i. John and the Little Scroll (10:1–11)

This is an unusual part of the interludes for two reasons; it is the only one in which John himself becomes an actor, and it is the only one with a present rather than a future thrust. The interlude of chapter 7 ended with the seventh seal (8:1) and a half hour of silence, the hushed expectancy with which the angelic order awaited the eschaton. This angel states clearly that “there will be no more delay” (10:6), so we are at the eschaton, which would certainly be the seventh trumpet. Yet at the same time the angel uses a prophetic, acted parable to announce to John that the church can rejoice in the arrival of the eschaton (the sweet scroll) but will go through a period of intense persecution as it arrives (the bitter scroll). Thus “no more delay” does not mean Christ’s return will occur immediately but rather there will be “no delay” in the events that will inaugurate that return. This becomes the basis of the commission of John’s prophetic activity (10:11).

- (1) Mighty angel descends with the little scroll (10:1–4)
- (2) Angel makes an oath (10:5–7)
- (3) John commissioned to prophesy (10:8–11)

Exegesis and Exposition

¹And I saw another mighty angel descending from heaven. He was clothed in a cloud, and a rainbow was upon his head. His face was like the sun, and his legs were like fiery pillars. ²He had a little scroll open in his hand, and he placed his right foot on the sea and his left on the land. ³He shouted with a loud voice like the roar of a lion. When he shouted, the voices of the seven thunders spoke. ⁴And when the seven thunders spoke, I was about to write, but I heard a voice from heaven saying, “Seal what the seven thunders have spoken, and do not write it down.”

⁵Now the angel that I saw standing on the sea and on the land raised his right hand to heaven ⁶and swore by the one who lives forever and ever, who created heaven and all that is in it, the earth and all that is in it, and the sea and all that is in it, saying, “There will be no more delay!” ⁷But in the days of the voice of the seventh angel, when he must sound the seventh trumpet, the mystery of God will be brought to completion, as he announced to his slaves the prophets.

⁸Then the voice that I heard from heaven spoke with me again, saying, “Go and take the book that is open in the hand of the angel who is standing on the sea and the land.” ⁹So I went to the angel and asked him to give me the little scroll. He told me, “Take and eat it. It will make your stomach bitter, but it will be sweet as honey in your mouth.” ¹⁰So I took the little scroll from the hand of the angel and ate it, and it was sweet as honey in my mouth; but when I ate it, my stomach became bitter.

¹¹Then they told me, “You must prophesy again about many peoples, nations, languages, and kings.”

(1) Mighty Angel Descends with the Little Scroll (10:1–4)

John’s typical καὶ εἶδον (*kai eidon*, and I saw) introduces an incredible vision, that of ἄλλον ἄγγελον ἰσχυρόν (*allon angelon ischyron*, another mighty angel). The first “mighty angel” appeared in 5:2, asking who was “worthy to open the scroll.” As stated above, there is a close connection between the scroll visions of chapters 5 and 10, for the scroll that was opened progressively with the breaking of the seals in 6:1–8:1 now lies “open” in the hand of this mighty angel (not the same angel but “another”). The third and final “mighty angel” appears in 18:21 and throws a huge boulder into the sea to symbolize the “violent” destruction of Babylon. The angel is seen καταβαίνοντα ἐκ τοῦ οὐράνου (*katabainonta ek tou ouranou*, descending from heaven). In 18:1 an angel with “great authority” descends from heaven. This is in direct contrast with the beast, who in 11:7 “ascends from the abyss.” Both of the angels who come down from heaven are glorious beings, with “a face like the sun” (10:1b) and illuminating the “whole earth . . . with his splendor”

(18:1).

Many have linked this angel with Gabriel (R. Charles, Sweet, Lohmeyer, Lohse, Kraft, Beasley-Murray) on the basis of the parallel in Dan. 12:7 (where he makes an oath to God like that in Rev. 10:6), and the meaning of his name (“strong man of God”); this is possible but still little more than speculation, for the angel is not named (contra Dan. 12:1, which names Michael). Others see this “mighty angel” as Christ (Moffatt, Seiss, Kraft, Sweet, Beale) because of the similarity between the description here and that of Christ in 1:12–16. Gundry (1994: 663–67) calls this “angelomorphic christology” and argues that it occurred frequently in the early church. But this being is called “another mighty angel,” and it is difficult to see how this depiction could refer to Christ (see the additional note). Still others (Bauckham 1993b: 254; cf. Aune) link this with the central revelatory angel of Rev. 1:1 and 22:16, because the scroll contains the contents of the revelation given in 1:1. That is possible but cannot be proven. Therefore this is simply “another mighty angel” like the ones in 5:2 and 18:21 (so also Feuillet 1967: 210).

The fourfold description is the most elaborate and majestic of any angel in this book, paralleling that of Christ in 1:13–16 or God in 4:3. First, he is περιβεβλημένον νεφέλῃν (*peribēblēmenon nephelēn*, clothed in a cloud). In 1:7 we are told that Christ is “coming in the clouds” (cf. Dan. 7:13; Matt. 24:30; 26:64; Acts 1:9–11), and in 1 Thess. 4:17 the believer will meet the departed loved ones “in the clouds.” In the OT God appears in a cloud as the sign of his “glory” (Exod. 16:10; Lev. 16:2; 1 Kings 8:10; Ezek. 10:4), and the angel as his representative also “wears” a cloud as a sign of God’s presence and of eschatological glory.^[1] Second, the angel has ἡ ἶρις ἐπὶ τῆς κεφαλῆς (*hē iris epitēs kephalēs*, a rainbow upon his head) just as God in 4:3 has a rainbow encircling his throne, signifying his mercy. In Ezek. 1:28 and Rev. 4:3 the rainbow encircled God, but here the rainbow is “over his head” almost like a crown. Thus God’s glory and his mercy are represented in the angel. Third, the angel has a face ὡς ὁ ἥλιος (*hōs ho hēlios*, like the sun), paralleling Christ, whose “face is like the sun” in 1:16 (also Matt. 17:2, where Jesus’ “face shone like the sun” at the transfiguration). The exaltation of Christ is also reflected in the angel. Fourth, his legs^[2] are “like fiery pillars,” again like Christ (in 1:15, “his feet were like gleaming brass refined in a furnace”). The primary background is found in the wilderness wanderings, when God sent a “pillar of fire” to guide the Israelites at night and a “cloud” by day (Exod. 13:21). This not only guided but protected and delivered God’s people (Exod. 14:24). Thus this angel signifies not only glory and power but also deliverance for God’s people. In short, this angel is not Christ but is the special herald of Christ and shares in his glory and his mission.

The mighty angel in 10:2 holds^[3] ἐν τῇ χειρὶ αὐτοῦ βιβλαρίδιον ἡνεωγμένον (*en tē cheiri autou biblaridion ēneōgmenon*, a little scroll opened in his hand). There is a great deal of debate as to whether this is the same scroll as the great scroll of chapter 5. Many (e.g., R. Charles, Lohmeyer, Lohse, Kiddle, Court, Roloff, Mounce) believe that these are two different scrolls. The term for the scroll in 5:1 is βιβλίον (*biblion*, scroll), while here it is βιβλαρίδιον (*biblaridion*, little scroll).^[4] That scroll was articular, in the right hand of God, closed and sealed with seven seals, while this is anarthrous and open in the hand of the mighty angel. Therefore, the content of the first scroll is seen to be the visions of 6:1–8:5, while the content of this “little scroll” is restricted to 11:1–13. However, there are several problems with this view, leading others (Beasley-Murray; Sweet; Boring; Wall; Bauckham 1993b: 243–49; Holwerda 1999: 151) to argue for identity between the scrolls of chapters 5 and 10. To restrict the scroll of chapter 5 is to do an injustice to its contents. As argued in 5:1–2, the first scroll contains the divine plan for the ending of this age, not just the seals and the angel with the censer. Also, βιβλίον is already a diminutive in form, though not in

function, and John calls this “little scroll” βιβλίον in 10:8. Thus these two terms are probably synonyms. Bauckham (1993b: 244–45, following Mazzaferri) argues that diminutives in Revelation do not carry diminutive force, and βιβλαρίδιον could have been used in the early church for Christian prophetic revelation (as exemplified in Herm. Vis. 2.1.3; 2.4.1–3). Moreover, both Rev. 5:2 and 10:1 begin with “And I saw a(nother) mighty angel,” and while the content of Rev. 5:1 stems from Ezek. 2:9–10, the content of Rev. 10:2–3 stems from Ezek. 3:1–3 (both part of Ezekiel’s call).

Therefore, the scroll was sealed in the right hand of God in chapter 5, progressively opened as the Lamb “opened” the seals in chapter 6, and now lies open in the hand of the mighty angel in chapter 10. It too tells the divine plan for the end of the age, and now John is to be shown how that plan relates to the saints that are still on earth. By using the imagery of the scroll closed in the hand of God, opened by the Lamb, and now open in the hand of the mighty angel, John is expanding the vision of Ezekiel’s call to relate his own prophetic call. Nevertheless, the choice of βιβλαρίδιον here was probably quite deliberate, and thus it does carry some diminutive force (Aune 1998a: 558 calls it “a true diminutive” because it is the diminutive of βιβλίον, already a diminutive in form). There is identity between the two scrolls but not absolute unity (so also Michaels 1997: 133–34; Beale 1999: 530–32). The scroll here is a “small” portion of the whole scroll containing the plan of God for ending this present evil world and introducing the “new heavens and new earth,” and depicting the place of the church in these events. This is the theme of 10:1–11 (the “sweet” and the “bitter” aspects of these events for the people of God) and 11:1–13 (the witnessing activity of the church during this time). In other words, chapters 6 and 8–9 described the relevance of these judgments for the nations of the world, and the two interludes of 7:1–17 and 10:1–11:13 describe its relevance for the saints.^[5]

While holding the scroll, the mighty angel then plants “his right foot on the sea and his left on the land.” Ancient readers would have thought of the Colossus of Rhodes, one of the ancient “seven wonders of the world,” a 105-foot-high bronze statue of Chelios (the patron deity of the city) built in 280 B.C. and destroyed by an earthquake in 224 B.C. A popular myth stated that its feet were on two huge piers guarding the harbor, and ships would pass between its legs. As Aune (1998a: 556) points out, however, it was actually on a promontory overlooking the harbor, and the magnificent statue was still visible on the ground in John’s day. By having one foot on the land and the other on the sea, John was stressing the dominion of the angel over the whole world and the significance of the message in the scroll for all the world.^[6] Throughout the biblical period, a conqueror would place his foot on the conquered land to signify possession of that land. Moreover, that these feet/legs are “like fiery pillars” (10:1) stresses both deliverance for the believers and judgment for the unbelievers.

As he planted his feet on sea and land in 10:3, the angel “cried out with a great shout.” This “great shout” occurs often in the book (1:10; 5:2, 12; 6:10; 7:2, 10; 8:13; 10:3; 11:12, 15; 12:10; etc.) for important proclamations, but this is especially strong because it is likened to “the roar of a lion.” Yahweh “roars” like a lion in Hos. 11:10; Amos 3:8; 2 Esdr. (4 Ezra) 11:37; 12:31, so this stresses that the mighty angel is a herald who speaks with the “mighty voice” of God.^[7] When the angel shouts, αἱ ἑπτὰ βρονταί (*hai hepta brontai*, the seven thunders) respond. Nearly all agree that this echoes Ps. 29 (indicated by the article pointing to the OT allusion),^[8] where God speaks like thunder seven times. Since the psalm celebrates the power of Yahweh as ruler of creation, it fits this context of the God who is sovereign over “sea and land.” When βρονταί (*brontai*, thunders) occurs in the book, it is in a context of the awesome God (4:5; 11:19; 14:2), the deliverance of his people (19:6), and judgment on the ungodly (6:1; 8:5; 16:18). But this is the only time the thunders actually “speak,”

and so the message probably summed up all these themes, especially that of deliverance (since the vindication of the church is a major theme in chaps. 7, 10) and judgment (since the context of the thunder proclamations in Ps. 29 is that of judgment). As John hears the message of these thunders in 10:4, he begins to obey the command of 1:11, 19 to “write” down the contents of the visions. Before he can put pen to paper, however, he hears “a voice from heaven.” There is a certain contrast between the “voice” of the thunders and the “voice” from heaven; this is a direct message from the throne (perhaps God or Christ himself; cf. 14:13; 18:4) and has precedence over the “voice” of the thunders. Just like the contents of the scroll had been “sealed” in chapter 5 to keep them from the people of this world, John must **σφράγισσον** (*sphragison*, seal up) the message of the seven thunders.

There have been many different interpretations of these seven thunders, especially since John is not allowed to write down their message. Least likely is the view that God has cancelled judgments so more could be converted, that is, shortened the days for the sake of the elect (Farrer, Caird, Sweet); this is impossible to explain in light of the judgments that predominate throughout chapters 6–18. Another view (Moffatt 1983: 411–12) asserts that John uses the seven thunders rhetorically to explain why he is omitting details from his material in order to move to other matters; but if that were the case, John could simply omit them without comment. Still others (R. Charles, Morris) appeal to 2 Cor. 12:4 and state that the revelations were too sacred to be revealed at this time; however, it is hard to know why these were too sacred while the others in the book were not so. Or perhaps John is using this to oppose certain apocalyptic prophets who used these thunders to predict apocalyptic timetables regarding the exact time of the eschaton (Krodel 1989: 213–14); but this would certainly be a strange way to do so, since timetables are not part of the context. Closer to the context are those who say this represents a further series of plagues or judgments that have been either cancelled (Mounce 1998: 203–4) or not revealed (Beale 1999: 534–35). However, it is difficult to see why God would reveal three sets of judgments but not a fourth set. Holwerda (1999: 150) believes that the seven thunders may have called for an additional sevenfold judgment and are silenced because there is no place for another judgment since the other judgments had not led to repentance (9:20–21). But this fails to explain why there are further judgments in ensuing chapters.

Two factors lead to at least a possible solution to this enigmatic passage. First, the seven thunders do not refer to a specific number of judgments but stem from the Ps. 29 allusion. Thus their message refers to general judgment rather than specific judgments. Second, the key term, **σφράγισσον**, might well contain a double meaning. On the surface, there is an echo of Dan. 12:4, where Daniel is told to “close up and seal the words of the scroll until the time of the end.” In this sense, God has determined the time when the church will know the contents, and they must await his will. Yet the connection of this passage with chapter 5 points to another aspect of the term, indicating sovereign ownership by God. In this context God commands John to “seal up” the message of the seven thunders and then tells him not to “write them down.” Thus John is being told to affirm God’s sovereign control over the judgments proclaimed in the thunders and then is prohibited from revealing the contents to his readers. The major message is one of sovereignty. God is in control, and the saints do not need to know all the details.^[9]

(2) Angel Makes an Oath (10:5–7)

By repeating that the angel stood “on the sea and on the land,” John shows the reader that God is in control of his world. Once again, sovereignty is the major emphasis. This is a distinct allusion to

Dan. 12:7, where the man clothed in linen standing above the waters of the river “lifted his right hand and his left hand toward heaven [and swore] by him who lives forever, saying, ‘It will be for a time, times, and half a time [= three and a half years; cf. Rev. 12:14]. When the power of the holy people has finally been broken, all these things will be completed.’” The lifting of the right hand at an oath was common (God in Deut. 32:40; [10] cf. Exod. 6:8; Ezek. 20:5, 15, 23, 42; Abraham in Gen. 14:22–23) to indicate personal responsibility for the promise.[11] Daniel 12:1–4 predicts that at the end of time the true people of God will be resurrected to eternal life, and the evildoers will be resurrected to eternal punishment; the angel then commands Daniel to “seal up” the scroll until the time of the eschaton. The oath of Dan. 12:7 is in response to the question, “How long will it be before these astonishing things are fulfilled?” (12:6). The connection with the forty-two months of Rev. 11:2 and so on is obvious, for the same question pervades this book, asked first by the martyrs of 6:10, “How long, sovereign Lord?” The answer is always the same: “When God sovereignly chooses, it will happen. Wait on him.”

In making the oath (10:6), the mighty angel ὣμωσεν ἐν τῷ ζῶντι εἰς τοὺς αἰῶνας τῶν αἰώνων (*ōmosen en tō zōnti eis tous aiōnas tōn aiōnōn*, swore by him who lives forever and ever). In the OT one of the most common forms of an oath is the phrase “as the LORD lives” (Num. 14:21; Judg. 8:19; 1 Sam. 20:3). By it those who made the oath “placed themselves under the power and judgment of Yahweh, who was invoked and recognized as witness for the validity of the promise” (Link, *NIDNTT* 3:739). The clause here is taken from Dan. 12:7 LXX, which expands the normal OT formula. It is not just “as the LORD lives” (see above) but “by the one who lives *forever and ever*,” an emphasis seen often in Revelation as well (1:6; 4:9, 10; 11:15; 15:7). The eternality of God is a major basis for the finality of his proclamations. In this context, where the theme is the end of all earthly things (as also in Dan. 12), it is important to realize that the God of eternity is in control.

The rest of the oath goes beyond Dan. 12:7, pointing to another of the major themes of the book, God the creator (cf. Rev. 3:14; 4:11). The God who created the universe is the God who will end it, in keeping with his title as “the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end” (1:8; 21:6). All three spheres of life in this world are stressed: the heavens, the earth, and the sea. Moreover, with each sphere God is seen as creator of τὰ ἐν αὐτῇ (*ta en autē*, the things in it), meaning that God is creator and sovereign over every single thing in this world. In 10:1–2 the mighty angel descended from “heaven,” then placed one foot on “the sea” and the other foot on “the land,” indicating God’s dominion over all that is in this world. Now we see also that he created all that is in each of these spheres. Bauckham (1993b: 253–54) observes that the threefold division of 10:5 (sea, land, heaven) is reversed in 10:6 (heaven, land, sea). This links the angel who comes from heaven and stands astride land and sea with the God who created all three. It is the angel of Yahweh who brings the scroll and delivers God’s message.

The message that the angel delivers culminates redemptive history. In Dan. 12:5–7 the great question is, “How long will it be?” The answer there is, “Only God knows,” and in verse 7 the time of fulfillment is linked to the apocalyptic phrase, “time and times and half a time” (the LXX uses χρόνος, *chronos*, time). Using the same term here, the oath the angel takes on behalf of God is χρόνος οὐκέτι ἔσται (*chronos ouketi estai*, there will be no more delay). In other words, the time of the eschaton predicted by Daniel has now arrived, and nothing can hold it back. The various designations for the three-and-a-half year “tribulation period”[12] have not appeared before chapter 10, but in ensuing chapters they appear often (11:2, 3; 12:6, 14; 13:5). God has instigated the final events of world history, and nothing can delay them.

Daniel 12:5–10 asks both “how long” it will be until the end (v. 6) and what the “outcome” will be

(v. 8). The man clothed in linen replies that the answer to both questions would not be given “until the time of the end” (v. 9). In Revelation that time has now arrived. The literal translation of the Greek is, “time will be no longer,” and it refers to the end of this world when time itself will cease to be, and eternity will begin. It also answers the martyrs’ “how long” in 6:10. The time of “waiting” (6:11) is over, and the vindication of the suffering saints is at hand.

That “time” will occur at the seventh trumpet (11:15–19). The mighty angel states (10:7) that the eschaton will occur ἐν ταῖς ἡμέραις τῆς ἰωνῆς τοῦ ἑβδόμου ἀγγέλου (*en tais hēmerais tēs phōnēs tou hebdomou angelou*, in the days of the voice of the seventh angel). This answers Daniel’s question as to when the end will come. Here it is important to see the significance of the plural ταῖς ἡμέραις, as well as the articular nature of the whole construction. This is not a reference just to the parousia of Christ but to the events of the day of Yahweh. What it includes depends on one’s theory as to the structure of the book as a whole. Since it is likely that the seventh trumpet occurs at the end of world history (see introduction), the reference is probably to the events of chapters 19–21 (the parousia, Armageddon, the millennium, the great white throne judgment, and the descent of the new heavens and new earth).

The “voice of the seventh angel” is further clarified as ὅταν μέλλῃ σαλπίζειν (*hotan mellē salpizein*, when the trumpet is about to sound). The key term here is μέλλῃ, which could mean that these events are to take place just prior to the seventh trumpet (“about to sound”), therefore referring to the tribulation period itself (the contents of chaps. 8–18). However, μέλλω can be virtually equivalent to a future tense (so Mounce, Johnson, Thomas); BAGD (500) says that in colloquial Greek the future infinitive and participle “were gradually disappearing and being replaced by combinations with μέλλω.” If there is any particular force, it could be its occasional synonymy with δεῖ (*dei*, must), denoting divine necessity. This is frequently the connotation in this book (cf. 1:19; 6:11; 12:5) and is likely the thrust here as well. The seventh trumpet is God’s sovereign herald, announcing the eschaton.

When the seventh trumpet sounds, ἐτελέσθη^[13] τὸ μυστήριον τοῦ θεοῦ (*etelesthē to mystērion tou theou*, the mystery of God will be brought to completion). Μυστήριον occurs four times in Revelation (with 1:20; 17:5, 7), and its background is in its apocalyptic function to designate those divine secrets that have been hidden from past generations and only revealed to the people of God in these last days. Due to the verbal force of “mystery,” a good case can be made for seeing τοῦ θεοῦ as a subjective genitive (as Beale 1999: 543 suggests), thus rendering the phrase “the mystery that God has revealed.” In the other instances the term referred to the meaning of particular details^[14] (the seven stars and lampstands in 1:20, the great prostitute in 17:5, 7), so it is valid to ask which part of the final events is here called a “mystery.” From the context it seems rather evident that it will be those events inaugurated by the seventh trumpet. Yet in what way will they be “completed”? This is the first of eight times τελέω is used in this book (11:7; 15:1, 8; 17:17; 20:3, 5, 7; the noun also occurs eight times), and it refers to “the consummating conclusion of a dynamic process, the goal of which manifests the realization of its meaning and its intentions” (Schipper, *NIDNTT* 2:65). In other words, the completion of the “mystery” is the conclusion of God’s plan that was initiated before the foundation of the world and is now finally to be realized in its fullness. Using the terms of Jesus in the Gospels, God’s “kingdom” (see Rev. 1:9; 11:15; 12:10), inaugurated in the first advent, is about to be culminated in the second advent.

Finally, the mighty angel tells us that the completion of this mystery was “announced to his slaves [on this term see 11:18], the prophets.” Here John turns to Amos 3:7, where in a judgment oracle Amos says, “the Sovereign LORD does nothing without revealing his plan [Hebrew טָוֶה, *sôd*,

secret counsel] to his servants the prophets.” However, John replaces Amos’s “revealed” with εὐηγγέλισεν (*euēngelisen*, proclaimed), probably with its full NT flavor of “announce the good news.” This is both the culmination of all “gospel” messages and the most important “good news” ever given. God’s plan of salvation is about to be completed. The reference to God’s “slaves, the prophets,” would certainly include both OT and NT prophets. The OT prophets received God’s message regarding the final inbreaking of the kingdom but did not understand when or how it was to take place (cf. 1 Pet. 1:10–12); the NT prophets received the final revelation of that “mystery” and awaited the consummation.

(3) John Commissioned to Prophecy (10:8–11)

After the interlude of the mighty angel’s oath in 10:5–7, the action now returns to the theme of the little scroll in 10:1–4. As such, it also returns to the connection with Jesus taking the scroll in 5:1–8 and with the commissioning of Ezekiel in Ezek. 3:1–3. Therefore, there are two levels of meaning here. Primarily, John’s consuming the scroll signifies the passing on of revelation to him (like Ezekiel) and his own commission to prophecy (10:11).^[15] At the same time, the message concerns the church’s place in the “mystery of God” soon to be consummated; it will be “bitter” because it involves much suffering, yet “sweet” because the church will emerge triumphant.

First, the “voice from heaven” that had told John to “seal up” the message of the seven thunders in 10:4 gives John a further command, to take the scroll from the hand of the mighty angel. The use of πάλιν (*palin*, again) emphasizes the link with verse 4: there the heavenly voice told John not to write; here the voice tells John to prophesy. The Greek here is clumsy. There is no verb, and ἡ Ἥωνή (*hē phōnē*, the voice) stands by itself, with the participles λαλοῦσαν . . . καὶ λέγουσαν (*lalousan . . . kai legousan*, speaking . . . and saying) carrying the action of the main verb. Beale (1999: 540) is probably correct when he sees the participles functioning in Semitic fashion as main verbs used to “highlight OT allusions” (similar to the use of participles in 1:10–11; 4:1), here Ezek. 2:8–3:3.

Note also the progression in the revelation of the contents of the scroll from chapters 5–10. In 5:1 the scroll was in the right hand of the enthroned God in heaven, and in 5:7–8 the Lamb took the scroll from God’s hand. In 6:1–14 and 8:1 the Lamb opened all seven seals, then in 10:1–2 the mighty angel brought the scroll to earth, where it lay “open” in his hand. Now John is asked to replicate the action of the Lamb in 5:7 by taking it from the hand of the angel.

Moreover, this also echoes the commission of Ezekiel in Ezek. 2:8–3:3 and so becomes a commission of John (so Feuillet; Bauckham 1993b: 246–49; Thomas; Beale). After being told of his mission to “a rebellious nation” in 2:3–8, Ezekiel sees a scroll in the palm of a hand (probably the “likeness of the glory of the LORD” in 1:28) and is commanded to “eat this scroll” in 3:1. Thus he is commissioned to his prophetic ministry. The heavenly voice tells John to repeat Ezekiel’s action and “take the scroll” from the hand of the angel. What is emphasized here is that this scroll is “open in the hand of the angel,” signifying that its message is now “open” to the church. The plan of God for the consummation of this world has been revealed through the prophetic ministry of John in writing down these visions.

We are then told for the third time (10:2, 5, 8) that the angel is “standing on the sea and on the land.” Though some have said this is “no more than rhetorical repetition” (Mounce 1998: 208), that is unlikely. In both 10:2 and 10:5 the angel standing on sea and land symbolizes God’s dominion over this world, and that is continued here. God is both sovereign and omnipotent over the affairs of this world, and the revelation of the church’s role in this final eschatological drama is part of his sovereign control over these events.

John's obedient response in 10:9 is immediate. He goes to the angel and asks for the scroll. John is intimately involved in his commissioning service, and his obedience to his heavenly calling is emphasized throughout. Here the angel adds to the command of 10:8 by saying, **Λάβε καὶ κατάλαγε αὐτό** (*Labe kai kataphage auto*, Take and eat it). The idea of consuming the word of God occurs often in the OT. Psalm 119:103 says, "How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth" (cf. Ps. 19:10; Prov. 24:13–14), and Jer. 15:16 states, "When your words came, I ate them; they were my joy and my heart's delight." Therefore, to "eat" the scroll means to take its message to heart, to internalize the prophecy and put it to work in one's life. This follows Ezekiel's action closely. In Ezek. 3:2–3 he is told to eat the scroll, which he is then given by the one with the "appearance of the likeness of the glory of the LORD" (1:28), signifying his commission to prophesy God's message. Thus here John is commissioned to proclaim the contents of the little scroll.

He is also told that when he consumes the little scroll, it **πικρανεῖ** (*pikranei*, will be bitter) in his stomach but **γλυκὺ ὡς μέλι** (*glyky hōs meli*, sweet as honey) in the mouth. Ezekiel discovers that the scroll is "sweet as honey" (Ezek. 3:3b), but no mention is made of its bitterness. However, the scroll itself contains "words of lament and warning and woe," and God told him his message would be rejected (Ezek. 3:4–7), so he left in "bitterness and in the anger of my spirit" (Ezek. 3:14). This verb is also used in Rev. 8:11 of the waters turned "bitter" or poisonous by the star Wormwood, so it is a very strong metaphor here. It speaks of an extremely painful or bitter experience.

This is exactly John's experience (Rev. 10:10). There is considerable discussion regarding the connotation of "sweet" and "bitter" in this context.^[16] Some think it is "sweet" because it is God's word but bitter because it is a message of judgment (Beale 1999: 552) or because it will involve rejection in the same way as Ezekiel and Jeremiah experienced (Swete 1911: 131). This is problematic because it is too broad. It fits the context of the scroll in chapter 5 more than the little scroll in chapter 10. Others say it is sweet to John as a message of salvation that he embraces completely but bitter because it means persecution for him (Sweet 1979: 180; Krodell 1989: 216). This is closer to the meaning, but it is likely that the two reactions to the scroll are not to be limited to John alone. The key is to remember that the context of the interlude in 10:1–11:13 closely involves the church. It is "sweet" because God's sovereign will is always for the benefit of his people; they will be vindicated and rewarded for their sacrifices. They can know that God is in charge, and nothing can happen without his knowledge and will. It is "bitter" because it will involve great suffering and persecution, even martyrdom (6:9–11) for the saints. As is the message of 1 Peter, suffering is the path to glory (1 Pet. 1:11; 4:1, 12–19).

After this parabolic action, John is given his direct commission to prophesy in 10:11. Interestingly, the command does not come from either angelic figure, but rather is plural, **λέγουσιν** (*legousin*, they say). This could mean that both the mighty angel (10:1–3, 5–7) and the heavenly voice (10:4, 8) address John (so Griblin 1984: 435), but it is probably better to take this as an indefinite plural pointing to God as the source of the commission. John is told, **Δεῖ σε πάλιν προφητεῦσαι** (*Deise palin prophēteusai*, You must prophesy again). His prophetic ministry is a divine "must," a necessity in light of the importance of the message; God has ordained it. This is not the first time John is commissioned in this book. In 1:11, 19 he was told to "write" down "what you have seen, what is now, and what will take place later." Then in 4:1 John was called to heaven in order to be shown "what must take place after this." The commission to "prophesy again" builds on both these and so is a recommissioning to his prophetic ministry, somewhat on the line of Paul's repeated calls to his mission to the Gentiles (Acts 9:15; 22:21; 26:17–18).^[17] John is reminded by God of his ministry in light of these visions, and this will especially relate to the rest of his

prophetic writing in chapters 12–22 as well as his prophetic action in 11:1–2 (Michaels 1997: 136–37 sees a special connection between the call to prophesy here and the action of 11:1–2). In light of what God was about to reveal to John, he needed the strength he would get from realizing that his commission paralleled that of Ezekiel.

His prophetic activity was to be ἐπὶ λαοῖς καὶ ἔθνεσιν καὶ γλώσσαις καὶ βασιλεῦσιν πολλοῖς (*epi laois kai ethnesin kai glōssais kai basileusin pollois*, about many peoples and nations and tongues and kings). The preposition ἐπὶ is critical, for if it is translated “about,” it is a positive message addressed to the church in its mission to the nations. If it is translated “against,” it is a negative proclamation of judgment against the nations. The ministry of judgment conducted by the two witnesses in 11:3–6 would favor the judgment interpretation. Moreover, Beale (1999: 554) points to the use of προφητεύω ἐπὶ in the LXX predominantly (22 of 25 occurrences) in a judgment context. Schnabel (1999: 7–8) argues also that the list of nations looks forward to 11:1–14, where the “people and tribes and languages and nations” (11:9) are judged. However, a good argument can also be made in behalf of the more positive thrust. Bauckham (1993b: 264–66) approaches it from the standpoint of the fourfold list of peoples, nations, tongues, and kings. This is the third of seven places this list occurs. In the first two occurrences (5:9; 7:9), the list refers to Christians converted from the nations. From now on, the list refers to the nations in rebellion against God and his people (11:9; 13:7; 17:15) and yet as the objects of his redemptive mission (14:6). As a transition from 10:1–10 to 11:1–13, the list here could well look to the church in its prophetic witness of suffering to the world. It seems that “about” is a better translation, but it must be taken as containing both positive and negative elements. Warning and witness are hardly mutually exclusive categories in prophetic witness. Both 11:1–13 and chapters 12–18 combine both negative proclamations of judgment and positive calls to repentance. The trumpet judgments use judgment to call the nations to repentance. Therefore, the prophetic activity to which John is called contains both emphases, though probably with negative warning predominating in this context of the seals, trumpets, and bowls. Schnabel (1999: 8n) points out a possible connection (which he doubts due to his belief that this is prophecy “against”) between this and Matt. 10:18 and Mark 13:9, which describe the church “dragged before governors and kings because of me as a testimony to them.” He argues that the witness there is a positive presentation of the gospel, and that parallel (which is probably valid) would favor a more general understanding of ἐπὶ here.

There are two additions to the other lists. This is the only one to contain πολλοί (*polloi*, many), which probably heightens the sense of universal witness in the context. Πολλοί is used often in the book in a hyperbolic sense (5:11; 8:11; 9:9) to refer to an innumerable multitude,^[18] and it seems to have a similar sense here, the innumerable people who were to be warned and challenged by the prophetic ministry of John and the church. Also, this is the only list to contain βασιλεύς (*basileus*, king). This is probably added due to the presence of the “kings of the earth” in 6:15; 16:14; 17:10–11 as rulers of the nations and persecutors of the saints.

Summary and Contextualization

Two themes have tremendous implications for the church today. God’s absolute sovereignty is once again uppermost, especially in 10:1–7. The description of the mighty angel is cause for awesome worship, as every detail fits the description of God in the OT and of Christ in chapter 1. The seven thunders bring back the image of Sinai and God’s oath of judgment in Ps. 29. John clearly intends this as a warning to those who are resisting God. How can they think they can

stand against the Lord of the universe? Through the interaction with Dan. 12:4–9 in Rev. 10:5–7, the reader is made aware of the progressive revelation by which God has made known his plan for the end of the age. Neither Ezekiel nor Daniel understood the implications (see also 1 Pet. 1:10–11), but now through John God has made it known that the eschaton is near. The events that will bring human history to a close are now clear to those with ears to hear (2:7, 11, 17, etc.), and the saints must be cognizant of the seriousness of the issues. God is indeed sovereign over his created world, and the “mighty angel” demonstrates this dominion by planting his feet on land and sea in the name of God and of Christ. When he swears “the delay is over,” the reader is startled by the suddenness and the power of the assertion. That moment the whole Bible has been preparing for, the event the people of God have awaited for millennia, has arrived.

The second theme is the prophetic witness of the church. God commands John to reenact the commissioning of Ezekiel (Ezek. 2:8–3:3), and the result is to be the same as Ezekiel’s—the sweetness of obedience but the bitterness of rejection and suffering. Through John the church is called to the same ministry of preaching repentance and judgment to a generation that has turned their backs on God. It will involve persecution and even martyrdom (the sour stomach), but God has given his people the privilege of proclaiming his Word (the sweet mouth), and that is enough.

Additional Notes

10:1. ἄλλον ἄγγελον ἰσχυρόν: Beale (1999: 522–25) makes the strongest case yet for the “mighty angel” being Christ himself. First, he takes the “cloud” as the “divine glory cloud from which God speaks” in the OT, paralleling the “one like a son of man” seated on a cloud in 14:14 (cf. 1:7). Second, the rainbow on his head is the rainbow of 4:3 (taking the article in ἡ ἴρις as an article of previous reference linking the rainbows of 4:3 and 10:1) and therefore pointing to the divinity of the angel in 10:1. Third, the “face like the sun” parallels the description of Christ in 1:16, and the “feet like burnished bronze” parallels Christ in 1:15. Fourth, the description of the angel’s activity in 10:2–6 is built on the “one like a son of man” in Dan. 10–12, and the activity of the angel replicates that of Yahweh in the OT. While all this provides strong grounds for Beale’s conclusion, this being is called “another mighty angel,” and this language is not used of Christ in the Book of Revelation (though Gundry 1994: 670 would also see this of the angels in 18:1, 21). Beale’s second choice, that the angelic figure of Rev. 10:1 is “an angelic representative of Christ who therefore possesses Christ’s traits” (1999: 520) is far more likely.

10:4. ὅτε: Several manuscripts have ὅσα instead, including $\square^{47}$ it^g etc., but ὅτε has even more impressive support (A C P 046 1006 vg arm etc.), and most agree with Metzger (1994: 670) that ὅσα is “an exegetical modification.”

10:6. καὶ τὴν θάλασσαν καὶ τὰ ἐν αὐτῇ: This phrase is missing in several manuscripts ($\square^*$ A 1611 2020 2344 it^g arm etc.). Good witnesses include it ($\square^{47}$ C P 1006 1854 etc.), however, and it is likely that the eye of the scribe simply skipped it because the three phrases (i.e., “the heavens and all that is in them and the earth and all that is in it and the sea and all that is in it”) were exactly the same. Therefore, the three are original.

10:7. There are several text-critical difficulties in this verse. Some manuscripts ($\square^{47}$ 2344 2329 $\square$ etc.) insert καὶ between δούλους and προφήτας, thus making two groups, “servants and prophets.” Most do not have the καὶ, however, and the OT background makes “his servants the prophets” the more likely reading. Also, some have αὐτοῦ (046 1006 1828 etc.) instead of the stronger ἑαυτοῦ ($\square^{47}$ $\square$ A C P 1611 etc.), but the external evidence strongly favors ἑαυτοῦ.

10:10. βιβλαρίδιον: There is a great deal of variance between βιβλαρίδιον (A C P etc.), βιβλίον (1854 046 $\square$), and βιβλιδάριον (some minuscules). Since the first occurs in 10:2 and 10:9, and the second in 10:8, it is easy to see why scribes became confused. Since βιβλαρίδιον has stronger manuscript support, it is the more likely reading.

ii. John Measures the Temple and Altar (11:1–2)

For the second time (with 10:8–10), John is asked to perform a prophetic action similar to those done by Ezekiel and Jeremiah. The first entailed his commissioning service and told the church it would experience victory through suffering. This action reiterates the suffering motif but adds the theme of God’s protective hand upon his people. In 3:10 the Philadelphia church was told that Christ would “keep you from the hour of trial,” and in 7:3–4 an angel placed “a seal on the foreheads of the servants of our God,” signifying divine ownership and protection. As a result, the locusts were told they could “harm only those who do not have the seal of God on their foreheads” (9:4), and 9:20 made clear that those killed by the demonic horsemen were those who had refused to repent. This theme continues here. Court (1979: 82–83) states that the opening of the first interlude (the sealing of the saints in 7:1–8) and the opening of the second (the measuring of the temple in 11:1–2) parallel one another in focusing on the divine protection of God’s people.

As many have pointed out (Ladd, Mounce, Gregg, Beale), there are several possible interpretations: (1) The preterist view (Chilton, Roloff) sees this as a description of the destruction of Jerusalem and preservation of the church in John’s day. Thus, the temple is Herod’s temple and the outer court the actual court of the Gentiles. Others (Swete; Feuillet 1964: 237–39; McNicol 1979) believe this is the opposition between the synagogue and the church/144,000; the inner court is the protected church and the outer court is the judgment of unbelieving Israel.[1] (2) The idealist view (Caird, Beale) believes this depicts the world’s opposition to the church. The inner court refers to the church as belonging to God and the outer court to the church as persecuted by the world. Others (R. Charles, Kiddle, Hendriksen) see the outer court as the apostate church that turns against the people of God. (3) The dispensational view (Walvoord, Seiss, Thomas) sees this as the rebuilt temple of the tribulation period, with the converted Jewish “worshipers” (the 144,000 of 7:1–8) persecuted by the followers of the Antichrist for “forty-two months” (the great tribulation). (4) A modified futurist view holds that this teaches the spiritual preservation of either the church (Mounce, Michaels) or the remnant of believing Jews (Ladd 1972: 152–53) in this final period of tribulation (the forty-two months). In a similar way, Aune (1998a: 598) believes the inner court is the transformed wilderness in which the remnant finds protection and thus physically survives the tribulation.

(1) Measuring the inner court (11:1)

(2) Excluding the outer court (11:2)

Exegesis and Exposition

¹And he gave me a measuring reed resembling a rod, saying, “Rise up and measure the temple of God and the altar and the worshipers in it. ²But exclude the court that is ‘outside’ the temple. Do not measure it, for God has given it to the Gentiles, and they will trample the Holy City for forty-two months.”

(1) Measuring the Inner Court (11:1)

With another divine passive, ἐδόθη (*edothē*, it was given; see 6:4, 8, 11; 7:2; 8:3; 9:1, 3, 5), John emphasizes again the divine impetus behind these events. As Giesen (1997: 241–42) points out, it is

probably both God and Christ who give John the measuring rod, since they act in communion with one another frequently in the book. John is given *κάλamos ὁμοιος ῥάβδῳ* (*kalamos homoiōs rhabdō*, a measuring reed resembling a rod). This was a small, lightweight, hollow reed that was straight as a “stick” (*ῥάβδος*) and was often used for measuring the length of things. It was about ten feet four inches in length. John is told to take it and *μέτρησον* (*metrēson*, measure) the temple and its environs. This is close to Ezek. 40:3, 5 LXX, in which the “man in appearance like bronze” has *κάλamos τὸ μέτρον* (*kalamos to metron*, a measuring rod) in his hand and uses it to measure the temple. It is clear that for a second time (with 10:8–10) John is told to re-create one of Ezekiel’s visions.

In Ezek. 40–42 the measuring of the temple signifies God’s ownership and protection of his people. God is present with his people, and they belong to him. Also, in Zech. 2:1–5 a man with a measuring line goes out to measure Jerusalem in order to indicate God’s protection of the Holy City.^[2] Therefore, he would restore the temple to his people. Ford (1975b: 176) lists four possible interpretations of the measuring here: (1) rebuilding or restoring the church (cf. Ezek. 40:3–5); (2) destruction of apostates (Amos 7:7–9); (3) preserving the people of God from physical harm; and (4) preserving the saints from spiritual harm. The second is unlikely because the emphasis is not on judgment by God but on persecution by the Gentiles in this context. The third is problematic because in 11:2 the Gentiles are allowed to persecute the saints. The first is possible, but that does not seem to be the emphasis here. Rather, the stress is on the preservation of the saints spiritually in the coming great persecution (so Swete, Prigent, Johnson, Harrington, Talbert, Mounce, Aune).

John is asked to “measure” three things: *τὸν ναὸν τοῦ θεοῦ καὶ τὸ θυσιαστήριον καὶ τοὺς προσκυνοῦντας ἐν αὐτῷ* (*ton naon tou theou kai to thysiastērion kai tous proskynountas en autō*, the temple of God and the altar and the worshipers in it). *Ναός* is the only term used for the temple in this book (see on 3:12; 7:15) and refers to the building itself rather than the whole temple area. Moreover, throughout the book it connotes the heavenly temple rather than the Solomonic or Herodian temples on earth. Bachmann (1994: 476–79) argues strongly that this must be the heavenly rather than the earthly temple on diachronic (OT and early Jewish parallels like the ideal temple of Ezek. 40:3–42:20; 4QFlor 1.2–6; Josephus, *Ant.* 3.6.4 §123; 3.7.7 §181) and synchronic (the emphasis in Revelation itself, e.g., “worship” in 4:10; 5:14; 19:4) grounds. This fits the background of Ezekiel’s eschatological temple. The *θυσιαστήριον* then may well be primarily the altar of incense in keeping with its use in 6:9 and 8:3.^[3] With the combination of “temple and altar” here, it is also likely that this refers to the inner “sanctuary” (the basic meaning of *ναός*) rather than the whole complex of buildings. Moreover, 11:2 separates the “outer court” from the “temple” here, so this must be the sanctuary in the inner portion of the temple area. The major debate is whether we should take this literally of a reconstituted temple in the last days (with Seiss, Walvoord, Thomas) or figuratively of the church in this final period (Ladd, Mounce, Aune) or throughout church history (Caird, P. Hughes, Beale). Since the imagery throughout the book is of a heavenly temple, it is difficult to conceive how this could refer to a literal temple on earth. Therefore, this is the church, primarily the saints of this final period but secondarily the church of all ages (as argued throughout this commentary). Holwerda (1999: 155–56, building on Aune 1998a: 630) sees this as the corporate protection of the church similar to the promise (Matt. 16:18) that the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. Often in the NT, the “temple” signifies the church; cf. 1 Cor. 3:16–17, “you yourselves are God’s temple,” and 2 Cor. 6:16, “we are the temple of the living God” (cf. also Eph. 2:19–22; Heb. 3:6; 1 Pet. 2:5). This follows in that tradition. As some have pointed out (Krodel 1989: 219; Beale 1999: 563), Qumran also viewed itself as the true “temple of God,” the community

of the last days. Some believe that the inner court especially refers to the court of the priests and that the believing community is seen once again as “a kingdom and priests” (Rev. 1:6; 5:10; 20:6; cf. 1 Pet. 2:5).

What does it mean to “measure” the προσκυνοῦντας, and how do we separate them from the “church”? Here the worshipers are described as ἐν αὐτῷ (*en autō*, in it),^[4] so this refers to the individual believers in the church.^[5] When they are “measured,” they are identified as belonging to God and under his protection. This pictures the saints as within the precincts of the temple/church worshipping God and “overcoming” the world (see chaps. 2–3). They have no part with the world but “conquer” it “by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony” (12:11).

Yet it is important to understand what the protection of God means in this context. We know from 6:9–11 that many will be martyred and from 13:7 that God will give the beast “power to make war against the saints and to conquer them.” Therefore, it is clear that God will protect his people not from physical harm but rather from spiritual harm. This is indeed the connotation in the parallels regarding God’s protection of his people (3:10; 7:3–4; 9:4; 12:6, 14, 16). As Beale (1999: 562) points out, this is in keeping with the fulfillment pattern in Ezek. 40–42. There the measuring secured the temple from the abomination of idolatrous worship in its precincts. Here it signifies that God would spiritually protect his people from “contamination with idolatrous influences” (a major problem due to the Nicolaitan cult; cf. 2:2, 6, 14–15, 20–24). Though the church will undergo terrible suffering at the hands of its enemies (11:2; also 6:9–11), God will be with those who “overcome,” and they will emerge victorious. The victory is seen in the parallel 21:15–21, where an angel “measures” the New Jerusalem—“the city, its gates, and its walls.” In chapter 21 there is no excluded outer court, for the time of persecution is over, and God will be present with his people for eternity. Thus, the measuring of the sanctuary here is a “prophetic anticipation” (so Krodel 1989: 220) of the final victory of the church.

(2) Excluding the Outer Court (11:2)

This is indeed the meaning when John is told in 11:2 to τὴν αὐλὴν τὴν ἔξωθεν τοῦ ναοῦ ἔκβαλε ἔξωθεν (*tēn aulēn tēn exōthen tou naou ekbale exōthen*, throw outside the court that is outside the sanctuary). This is a strong command, for the verb normally connotes a violent image of “driving out” something. Here it is used metaphorically for “leaving out” or “excluding” something. The repetition of ἔξωθεν also emphasizes the “outer court,” which could be seen as the Court of the Gentiles. Solomon’s temple had two courts, an inner and an outer. However, Herod separated the inner court into the courts of the priests, of Israel, and of women. A portico separating these three from the Court of the Gentiles bore a plaque warning that any Gentile who passed into the inner courts would be put to death. Thus, the picture here may build on the fact that Gentiles had access only to the outer court in the temple; they were encouraged to worship there, but since they were unclean, they were not allowed into the inner precincts of the temple. So when John adds that the outer court was not to be measured ὅτι ἐδόθη τοῖς ἔθνεσιν (*hoti edothē tois ethnesin*, because it has been given^[6] to the Gentiles/nations), the imagery could reflect background from the temple of the first century. Furthermore, the “outer court” like the sanctuary must symbolize the saints who are persecuted. In all three temples—Solomon’s, Ezekiel’s, and Herod’s—the sanctuary, inner court, and outer court were sacred ground and belonged to God. Thus, in this section the outer court would mean that the church is handed over to the Gentiles/nations for a time.^[7]

The one problem is that the temple in Ezekiel is based on the Solomonic temple, with an inner

court (for the priestly rites) and an outer court (for the worshipers). If this is the background, it is not so much based on the temple of John's day but on Ezekiel's emphasis on a restored temple that will experience once again the presence of the Lord. Also, the command to exclude the outer court would be even more emphatic, for in Ezekiel the sanctuary and the outer court were "measured." It is very difficult to decide which is in John's mind here, the "current" temple (destroyed in A.D. 70 but still well known to Christians) or Ezekiel's eschatological temple. The message is much the same either way, but it is slightly more likely that John still has the Ezekiel temple in mind, for that fits the imagery in verses 1–2 better. This heightens the contrast, for it is the inner sanctuary (protected by God) and the outer court (handed over to the Gentiles) that are the thrust here. God is allowing the Gentiles/nations to τὴν πόλιν τὴν ἁγίαν πατήσουσιν (*tēn polin tēn hagian patēsousin*, trample the Holy City) for forty-two months. It is probable that, like the sanctuary in 11:1 and the "outer court" in 11:2a, the "Holy City" also symbolizes the people of God (contra Thomas 1995: 84, who takes it as the "earthly Jerusalem").

God's hand is upon his followers, but he has delivered them into the hands of sinners (paralleling Christ in Mark 9:31) for a time. BAGD (635) says that πατέω speaks "of a victorious army swarming through a conquered city. Its heedlessness, which acknowledges no limits, causes πα[τέω] to take on the concepts 'mistreat, abuse.'" The saints will suffer incredibly, but because God's protective hand is upon them, they will emerge triumphant. God is in control, and as in 3:10 and 7:3–4, he has "sealed" the saints and made them his own. The powers of evil can "conquer" them in a physical sense (13:7), but Satan will be "conquered" by them in the more important spiritual sense (12:11). This will be exemplified in the two witnesses of verses 3–13, who are killed by the beast and yet emerge victorious.

Bauckham (1993b: 266–73; also Fekkes 1994: 175–76) notes the influence of Dan. 8:11–14 on the image of God "giving" the outer court over to those who "trample" it.^[8] In Daniel's vision, the "little horn" "tramples" the "host of heaven" (probably God's followers, Dan. 8:9–10), and then due to Israel's rebellion, God "gives" the sanctuary and the sacrifice over to it (8:11–12), followed by a "how long" question similar to 12:6 (8:13–14). By adding Zech. 12:3 LXX, which speaks of the nations "trampling" Jerusalem, to the Daniel allusion (Dan. 8:11–14 and Zech. 12:3 may also be behind Luke 21:24, "Jerusalem will be trampled by the Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled," which itself parallels Rev. 11:2), John could well be seeing this as a further indication of the contents of the "little scroll" in 10:5–10. The sweetness of the scroll refers to 11:1, where God is present with his people (the sanctuary) and protects them (the measuring), and the bitterness of the scroll refers to 11:2, where God allows the nations to "trample" his people for a time.

The "forty-two months" (see also 13:5) is one of three ways the three and a half years (the one expression not found in Revelation) of Dan. 7:25; 9:27; 12:7, 11–12 are expressed in ensuing chapters—with "1,260 days" (an idealized time using thirty-day months in Rev. 11:3 and 12:6; Dan. 12:11 has the correct "1,290 days") and "time, times, and half a time" (with "time" = one year, "times" = two years in Rev. 12:14, alluding to Dan. 7:25; 12:7). Daniel does not use the "forty-two months" designation, and so this probably alludes to other OT themes, particularly the three and a half years of drought in Israel sent as a divine judgment in the time of Elijah (1 Kings 17:1ff.; 18:1; cf. Luke 4:25; James 5:17) and the wilderness wanderings (with forty-two encampments, Num. 33:5–49; so Morris 1987: 143; Beale 1999: 565). Both OT stories demonstrate that "forty-two months" symbolizes a time of tribulation and judgment, and this fits the similar use in Daniel. In Dan. 7:25 the saints are handed over to the "king" of the fourth beast; in 9:27 the "ruler" will break the covenant of the final seven-year period (of the seventy "sevens") and set up the "abomination that

causes desolation”; in 12:7 the number refers to the time before the “accomplishment” of the eschaton; and in 12:11–12 it refers to the time between the setting up of the “abomination that causes desolation” and the eschaton. Therefore, the period refers to a limited time in which God allows the Antichrist and his followers to triumph (see also Rev. 13:5–8) and the people of God to be persecuted and martyred.^[9] The “abomination that causes desolation” was primarily a prophecy of the terrible events of 167–164 B.C., when the Syrian ruler Antiochus Epiphanes caused pigs to be sacrificed in the temple and the villages of the Jews, but it was also fulfilled in the destruction of Jerusalem (Mark 13:14 par. Matt. 24:15) as a proleptic anticipation of the last days. In Revelation the final “fulfillment” refers to the terrible reign of the Antichrist, as he demands that everyone worship him (13:8, 14–15). Finally, the three-and-a-half year period refers to a limited period that is strictly under God’s control, in accordance with Matt. 24:22, “If those days had not been cut short, no one would survive, but for the sake of the elect those days will be shortened.” This period is linked to the last half of the seventieth “seven” of Dan. 9:27, thus to what is commonly called “the great tribulation” period. Some (Aune 1998a: 609; Prigent 1981: 162–63) point out a twofold connotation in the “forty-two months” (etc.) symbol: it is not only a divinely allowed time of persecution but also a time of protection and preservation. In 12:6, 14 the woman/church is cared for by God throughout this period. As will be developed in the ensuing chapters, while the people of God suffer to the point of martyrdom, those who are “sealed” (7:1–8) are protected spiritually from the evil forces. Indeed, their death is their victory (12:11). Giesen (1997: 246–47) calls the “forty-two months” the “time of the church.” It is a time of martyrdom but also a time of preservation and witness in which God stands in a special way with his chosen people.

Summary and Contextualization

The message of the place of the church in the end-time events continues from chapter 10. In 11:1–2 John is asked to replicate Ezekiel’s measuring of the temple (Ezek. 40:3–14), with much the same message. God’s people belong to him and are under his protection. However, 11:2 departs from the scene in Ezekiel and prophesies the situation of this final period in history: the “outer court” is unprotected, for God will allow the pagans to “trample” the saints for the period of the “great tribulation.” In other words, God will protect them spiritually but allow the forces of evil to persecute and kill them, similar to Jesus’ promise in Mark 10:30 that God would repay every sacrifice “a hundred times” but would allow “persecution.” The key to understanding the message for the church today is the basic hermeneutical perspective of this commentary: a futuristic perspective for the story itself and a secondary preterist/idealist interpretation of its significance for the church in John’s day and in our day. In other words, while John intended this as a description of events in the future, there was still a message for the seven churches, namely, that throughout their persecutions, God was watching over them and would vindicate them for all their suffering (cf. 6:9–11).

Additional Notes

11:1–2. A number of scholars (R. Charles, Beckwith, Kraft, Lohse, Beasley-Murray, Sweet, Boring, Aune) believe 11:1–2 reflects not a vision of John but a Jewish tract probably written by a Zealot at the destruction of Jerusalem, prophesying that while the outer court would be destroyed by the Romans, the true temple would be protected by God. John then took this and saw the temple as the saints preserved by God. This is hardly necessary, however, and has a number of problems. Would John actually use a tract proven tragically wrong by history (so Giesen 1997: 240)? Is there sufficient evidence that these two short verses reflect such a period? Also, why would he utilize a prediction from the Zealots, whose conduct was so reprehensible in the war (Josephus, *J.W.*

2.17.2–5 §§408–24; 4.3.4–12 §§138–207)? McNicol (1979: 197–98) says the only point of contact between the Zealot view and this text is the inner court as a place of safety, and that is insufficient proof. In short, this is highly unlikely. Other scholars (Lohmeyer, McNicol, Roloff, Krodel, Giesen) believe that both the measuring pericope of 11:1–2 and the two witnesses of 11:3–13 stem from Jewish Christian tradition, probably a Christian oracle. That is certainly possible. Though I believe that John saw this as an actual vision, God could have chosen an image from early Christian prophetic tradition. However, the idea of an origin in early Christian prophetic tradition is too speculative to state with any degree of probability. It is best to see 11:1–2 as built on Ezek. 40–42 rather than some type of prophetic utterance.

11:2. Some manuscripts (1828 1² et al.) substitute ἔσωθεν for ἔξωθεν, probably because scribes were confused by the repetition and thought it should refer to the inner courtyard. The reading ἔξωθεν has better manuscript support (□⁴⁷ A P 046 et al.) and fits the context better.

iii. Ministry, Death, and Resurrection of the Two Witnesses (11:3–13)

The many interpretations of the two witnesses make this one of the most debated passages in the book and indicate its importance. At the outset we must note how closely 11:3–13 are tied to 11:1–2. In 11:2b we are told “God gave [the outer court] to the Gentiles,” while 11:3 begins with “and I will give power to my two witnesses.” The second episode flows out of the first, and it is natural to suppose that if the church is symbolized in 11:1–2, it will also be central in 11:3–13. Court (1979: 85) points out that there are “shared allusions to time (42 months = 1260 days) and place (Jerusalem).” In fact, all three episodes in this interlude are woven together. In 10:1–11 the church is told it must suffer terribly (the bitter) and yet will emerge triumphant (the sweet), and in 11:1–2 the church is told that it belongs to God and will be protected by him (the measuring of the sanctuary = the church in 11:1) but that God will allow the nations to “trample” the people of God for a short time (11:2). We see this combination of victory and defeat acted out in the ministry of the two witnesses in 11:3–13.

The interpretation of the two witnesses is hotly contested. Some believe these are actual figures who will appear at this last stage of history and prophesy. Ford (1975b: 177–78) lists many suggestions offered throughout history: Enoch and Elijah (Hippolytus, Tertullian, and nearly all the church fathers who followed), Jeremiah and Elijah (Victorinus), James the bishop of Jerusalem and the apostle John (Bacon), two Christian prophets martyred by Titus (Gelin), Peter and Paul martyred by Nero (Munck, Boismard), two individual prophets modeled after Joshua and Zerubbabel (Zahn 1953: 425–27), the two olive trees of Zech. 4:1–2, linked with the priestly Messiah (Aaron) and the lay Messiah (Israel) of Qumran (Ford). Others (Swete, Lohse, Considine, Metzger, Talbert, Giesen, Mounce, Beale, Aune) argue that they are a symbol for the witnessing church like the temple, altar, outer court, and Holy City in 11:1–2.[1] I wonder if we have to choose between a literal and a symbolic meaning. On the basis of the beast referring to the Antichrist who will appear in these final days (see discussion at 13:1), I believe it is likely the witnesses will be historical figures. If the beast in 11:7 and 13:1 (see also that passage) is an individual rather than just a symbol for the evil empire, so the witnesses are also probably individuals who will appear at the end of history (see also Wong 1997: 347–50). On the basis of the details of their ministry in 11:3–6, the most likely background for these figures is Elijah and Moses. Like the Baptist, however, they will appear “in the spirit and power” of Moses and Elijah (cf. Luke 1:17) rather than being those personages. Also, the further suggestion by some that Moses and Elijah represent the Law and the Prophets is far-fetched. These are the two major eschatological figures expected in the last days, and that is sufficient for this context.

At the same time, the context of this interlude (10:1–11:13) makes it probable that they do stand for the witnessing church in its suffering and triumph (as in 10:8–10 and 11:1–2). Beale (1999: 574–75) gives six reasons for this identification of the two witnesses with the church: (1) the two lampstands (11:4) would be two churches (1:20); (2) the beast “overcoming them” (11:7) points to Dan. 7:21 and the nation of Israel (= the church); (3) in 11:9–13 the whole world sees the defeat and resurrection of the witnesses, and in a first-century setting that means they are found throughout the world; (4) the 1,260 days links this prophetic witness with the church’s experiences of 11:2; (5) the witnessing parallels the witnessing church elsewhere in the book (6:9;

12:11, 17; 19:10; 20:4); (6) both witnesses function as Moses and Elijah, so the stress is not on the individual but on the group. These are compelling for a symbolic function of the two witnesses but do not obviate the possibility that they are also individuals. The two lampstands point to a corporate aspect, but the two olive trees point to an individual aspect. They have a twofold ministry: judgment (11:5–6) and witness (11:7). Ladd (1972: 154) calls for “a blending of the symbolic and specific. . . . The two prophets may represent the witness of the church, . . . which witness will be consummated in the appearance of two prophets in the time of the end.”

This passage breaks naturally into two sections. The prophetic ministry of the witnesses is described in 11:3–6, and 11:7–13 details their death and resurrection, resulting in the only conversion of the earth-dwellers in the book (v. 13b). The second section has three parts, their death (11:7–10), their resurrection (11:11–12), and the results (11:13).

- (1) Prophetic ministry (11:3–6)
- (2) Death and resurrection (11:7–13)
 - (a) Death and seeming defeat (11:7–10)
 - (b) Resurrection (11:11–12)
 - (c) Judgment and repentance (11:13)

Exegesis and Exposition

³“And I will give authority to my two witnesses, and they will prophesy for 1,260 days ῥ clothed in ῥ sackcloth.” ⁴They are the two olive trees and the two lampstands that stand before the Lord of the earth. ⁵If anyone wants to harm them, fire comes out of their mouth and devours their enemies. If anyone wants to harm them, this is how that person must die. ⁶They have power to shut the heavens, so that it does not rain during the days of their prophesying. And they have power over the waters to turn them into blood and to strike the earth with every kind of plague as often as they want. ⁷And when they complete their testimony, the beast that ascends from the abyss will wage war against them and conquer them and kill them. ⁸Their corpse will lie in the street of the great city that is spiritually called Sodom and Egypt, where also their Lord was crucified. ⁹For three and a half days those from every people, tribe, language, and nation will watch their corpse and refuse to give them burial. ¹⁰The earth-dwellers will rejoice over them and be glad, and they will send one another gifts, because these two prophets had tormented the earth-dwellers. ¹¹Now after the three and a half days, the breath of life from God entered them. They stood on their feet, and great fear fell upon those who watched them. ¹²They heard a loud voice from heaven saying to them, “Come up here.” And they went up into heaven in a cloud, and their enemies watched them. ¹³At that hour a great earthquake came. A tenth of the city fell, and seven thousand people were killed in the earthquake. The rest were terrified and gave glory to the God of heaven.

(1) Prophetic Ministry (11:3–6)

Elsewhere, God’s sovereign action is seen in the divine passive ἐδόθη (*edothē*, was given), but here the more emphatic δώσω (*dōsō*, I will give)[2] is used. God’s sovereignty over this period is once again stressed. That they are called τοῖς δυσὶν μάρτυσίν μου (*tois dysin martysin mou*, to my two witnesses) is important. First, the dative case means that God is giving “to” them authority to prophesy and power to perform great wonders during this period. Note the contrast in the two uses of “give” in 11:2, 3. The church is “given” to the nations to be “trampled” underfoot, and at the same time God “gives” the church (the witnesses as a symbol of the church; see above) authority to emerge victorious by “witnessing” through its suffering (11:3). Second, the use of μάρτυσιν adds an important theme. Throughout the book, the idea of “witness” builds on the model of Jesus as the “faithful witness” (1:5; 3:14) and the church as witnessing both verbally (12:11; 17:6) and by persevering in the midst of hard times (6:9; 20:4). Third, there are two witnesses because of the Deuteronomic demand for two (Deut. 17:6; 19:15; cf. Num. 35:30). Thus, theirs is a legal ministry proving the guilt of the world before God (paralleling the forensic ministry of the

Spirit in John 16:8–11).

These witnesses *προφητεύουσιν* (*prophēteusousin*, will prophesy) for “1,260 days,” a variant of the “forty-two months” of 11:2 (see on that verse). Their ministry in this sense does not primarily connote the church of the interim period between Jesus’ two “comings” but more the final period of history when the Antichrist will both “conquer” the church (13:7) and be “conquered” by the church (12:11). Here we see that their “witness” is accomplished via a “prophetic” ministry. Since this is closely connected with the command to John to “prophesy” in 10:11, it should be understood in that light. That is more than simply to proclaim the gospel but likely means that they proclaim to the nations God’s message for the last days (cf. 10:10), built on the “little scroll” of chapter 10.

The witnesses are *περιβεβλημένοι σάκκους* (*peribēblēmenoi sakkous*, clothed in sackcloth), a prophetic action paralleling both Elijah (2 Kings 1:8) and John the Baptist (Mark 1:6). In both OT (Joel 1:8; Amos 8:10) and NT, sackcloth signifies mourning for the sin of the nation(s) and for the judgment that will result (see also on Rev. 6:12, where the sun turns “black like sackcloth”). It is also possible that the sackcloth was a call to sorrow for sin, as is sometimes the case in the OT. In Jonah 3:5–9 all the Ninevites, including the king, wore sackcloth to indicate their repentance and their pledge to “give up their evil ways.” Giesen (1997: 249) lists Isa. 3:24; 22:12; Jer. 4:8; 6:26 on this theme of repentance. In light of both the ministry of judgment on the part of the witnesses (11:3–6) and the fact that many of the earth-dwellers do repent (11:13), both aspects are present here. This also parallels John the Baptist, whose ministry was primarily a call to repentance. This means that in this final period the two witnesses (and the church) do not hide from the beast and his followers but engage in fearless preaching involving a call for the nations to repent.

John further identifies them (11:4) with imagery drawn from Zech. 4:2–6, where Zechariah is shown a vision of “a solid gold lampstand with a bowl at the top and seven lights on it, with seven channels to the lights. Also, there are two olive trees by it, one on the right of the bowl and the other on the left” (4:2–3). In Zechariah’s vision, the lampstand is the temple, and the seven lights on it are “the eyes of the LORD, which range throughout the earth” (4:10, on the basis of v. 4 [“not by might nor by power but by my spirit”], probably a reference to the Spirit of God); and the two olive trees refer to “the two who are anointed to serve the LORD of all the earth” (4:14), namely Joshua the high priest and Zerubbabel the governor. The message of the whole was that God was in charge of rebuilding the temple, and his Spirit would overcome their opponents (through Zerubbabel the Spirit would “level” the “mighty mountain,” 4:7, probably the opposition described in Ezra 4–5) and guide the two leaders in the completion of the task. Thus, here too John wants the reader to draw from the Zechariah background the theme that the Holy Spirit as the “eyes of the Lord” stands over the two witnesses/church and that the opponents will be “leveled” (see 11:5–6 below). Note that Zech. 4:2–3 was earlier significant in the interpretation of the “seven spirits” (Rev. 1:4; 3:1; 4:5; 5:6) as the “sevenfold Spirit of God.” Therefore, the implicit presence of the Holy Spirit here is likely.

In typical fashion, John reinterprets the images somewhat, making the single lampstand two and linking both with the same referent, the two witnesses. Giblyn (1984: 441) links the images by saying that in the metaphor the trees supply oil to the lampstand. The “two olive trees” may well picture the witnesses/church in its “priestly” (Joshua) and “kingly” (Zerubbabel) roles (so also Court 1979: 92; Giesen 1997: 250). In 1:6; 5:10; and 20:6, the church is described as “a kingdom and priests,” and in an interesting parallel, Qumran used Zech. 4:2–3 in its expectation of a royal and priestly Messiah (1QS 9, 11; so Roloff 1993: 132). In Rev. 1:20 and throughout the seven letters, the

lampstands refer to the seven churches. Aune (1998a: 612, following Kraft) believes that the olive tree metaphor should be taken more comprehensively as referring to “the anointing and, therefore, the official commissioning of these prophets.” The two lampstands are the two witnesses, who stand for the church.^[3] It has been said that the two refer specifically to the two churches that did triumph through suffering (Smyrna and Philadelphia). That is possible, for the witnesses would symbolize the “faithful” church that perseveres in its witness, but the major reason for the “two” is that they correspond to the two witnesses. It is also significant that these are lampstands αἱ ἐνώπιον τοῦ κυρίου τῆς γῆς ἑστῶτες (*hai enōpion tou kyriou tēs gēs hestōtes*, that stand^[4] before the Lord of the earth). This echoes Zech. 4:10, “The eyes of the LORD . . . range throughout the earth.” In other words, the “Lord of the earth” will watch over them, and he is in control of the entire situation. Since the imagery of “the sevenfold Spirit before the throne” (see on Rev. 1:4) is also drawn from Zech. 4:1–14, some (Bauckham 1993b: 165–66; Thomas 1995: 89) believe that John is linking the two witnesses with the activity of the Holy Spirit; “they are lampstands bearing the lamps which are the seven spirits” (Bauckham). It is by the power of the Spirit that they bear prophetic witness to the world.

These “witnesses” who stand as kings and priests of God in this final period of history now begin (11:5) their prophetic ministry of proclamation (their priestly function) and judgment (their royal function). The hand of God is upon them, and once again (cf. 3:10; 7:3–4; 9:4, 20; 11:1) his protection of his people is seen. Three scenes that reenact the prophetic ministries of Elijah and Moses demonstrate this (11:5–6). Εἴ τις αὐτοὺς^[5] θέλει ἀδικῆσαι (*ei tis autous thelei adikēsai*, if anyone wants to hurt them) describes the attempts of the earth-dwellers to kill them as they have killed the martyrs (6:9–11). Once more God’s sovereignty is seen, however, and the principle of *lex talionis* (law of retribution, a major theme in this book) takes over. Those who seek to kill the witnesses are instead killed by the witnesses, as πῦρ ἐκπορεύεται ἐκ τοῦ στόματος αὐτῶν (*pyr ekporeuetai ek tou stomatos autōn*, fire comes out of their mouth) and “devours” their adversaries. Until their prophetic witness is completed (note the similarity with the “hour” of Jesus’ destiny in John 7:30; 8:20), God would not allow anyone to harm them. The scene of fire destroying their enemies is an allusion to 2 Kings 1 and the conflict between Elijah and the soldiers of King Ahaziah. Ahaziah sent two companies of fifty soldiers each to bring Elijah, and Elijah called down fire from heaven each time so that the soldiers were consumed. The third captain fell on his knees before Elijah, and so Elijah went with him and condemned Ahaziah, whom God struck dead because of his idolatry. In John’s vision the fire does not come from heaven but from the “mouth” of the witnesses. Aune (1998a: 613) states that this was a metaphor for proclaiming the Word of God “in a situation of rebuke and condemnation” (Jer. 5:14b; Philo, *Quest. Exod.* 2.47).

This probably parallels the “sharp, double-edged sword” that “proceeded” (same term as here) from the “mouth” of Jesus in 1:16 (see discussion there) and spoke of Jesus’ proclamation of judgment (for the “mouth” as an apocalyptic symbol of judgment, see 2:12, 16; 9:17–19; 12:15–16; 16:13; 19:15, 21). Here too the “fire coming out of the mouth” most likely refers to their proclamation of judgment on the earth-dwellers. Jeremiah 5:14 demonstrates this view of a “fiery word” that “consumes” the guilty (cf. Ps. 39:3). Second Esdras (4 Ezra) 13:10 describes the man from the sea spewing “from his mouth a stream of fire and from his tongue . . . a storm of sparks” (cf. Sir. 48:1, where Elijah’s condemning words were “like a burning furnace”). In this sense the “fire” might also presuppose the coming fiery judgment of Rev. 20:11–14. Thus, there is a literal (*lex talionis*, as in the drought and plague that follow) and a symbolic (proclamation of judgment) aspect to the image in this vision. In 6:9–11 the martyred saints were promised vindication for all

they suffered. God's response to their imprecatory cry takes place in the book in several stages. The first occurred immediately in the sixth seal and its aftermath, as the cosmic signs led the earth-dwellers to plea for an avalanche to engulf them and hide them from the wrath of God and the Lamb (6:15–17). The second occurred in 8:3–5, as their prayers ascended to God and led him to hurl down the trumpet judgments upon the unbelievers. The third occurs here, as the two witnesses execute divine judgment on the enemies of God and his people (see also 16:5–7).

To emphasize the judgment element, John in 11:5b repeats the conditional clause with two changes. In place of the present indicative **θέλει** in 11:5a, he has the aorist subjunctive **θελήσῃ** (*thelēsē*, wants). While some (e.g., Beale 1999: 581–82) believe the subjunctive here is virtually synonymous with the indicative in the first half of the verse, I think that it more likely adds meaning, namely the idea that if opponents “should want” to attack, they will be killed. Here also **δεῖ** (*dei*, must) has the force of divine necessity (see 1:1; 4:1; 10:11)—God has sovereignly decreed that they “must be killed.” The judgment does not just come from the two witnesses but from God himself. Lohmeyer (1926: 89) calls this their “divine destiny.”

The next two judgments in 11:6 are plagues that parallel the plagues of the trumpets and bowls, following the threefold pattern of the heavens, the waters, and the earth in the first four of each. Michaels (1997: 139–40) points out that 11:5–13 is in effect a transformation of the trumpet judgments, as the two witnesses/people of God become the “executors of divine judgments.” The story of Elijah shutting the heavens in 1 Kings 17–18 is the basis of the drought that will extend throughout “the time that they prophesy.” In 18:1 we are told the drought lasted three years, but later Jewish tradition symbolically represented this as three and a half years in keeping with the apocalyptic image of Dan. 9:27; 12:7 (cf. Luke 4:25; James 5:17), and that fits the 1,260 days of Rev. 11:3. In 1 Kings 17 the occasion for this judgment was the idolatry of Israel under King Ahab, and that provides a fitting parallel for the idolatry of Rev. 9:20–21. Some think that this also points to the destruction of Jerusalem, when the pool of Siloam was dried up just before the siege (see Josephus, *J.W.* 5.9.4 §410), but the similarity is insufficient to constitute a parallel.

Like Moses, these witnesses can “turn water into blood,” paralleling the first Egyptian plague (Exod. 7:20–21) as well as the second trumpet (Rev. 8:8) and the second and third bowls (16:3–4). Here again we must understand that for the Romans (like the Egyptians of Moses' day) water was a symbol of life. For Rome the shipping lanes were the “lifeblood” of the empire, so for water to turn to blood would mean life is replaced by death. Finally, all the Egyptian plagues are replicated, as the two witnesses have power from God “to strike the earth with every kind of plague as often as they want.” This means they can reproduce any of the Egyptian plagues at will. And it functions virtually as a summary of the first four trumpets and bowls, also called **πληγή** (*plēgē*, plague; cf. 9:18, 20; 16:9, 21). As the Egyptian plagues proved the powerlessness of the gods, so these prove that the demonic forces and the earthly gods have no power, and Yahweh alone controls the natural forces. God and his agents are sovereign, and all opposition is futile beyond what God allows.

(2) Death and Resurrection (11:7–13)

(a) Death and Seeming Defeat (11:7–10)

At the end of the three-and-a-half-year period, the two witnesses “have finished their testimony,” and at that point God allows the forces of evil to triumph for a time. As Beale (1999: 587) points out, this refers back to the martyrs who have lost their lives due to “the testimony they have

maintained” in 6:9. It is their witness that has brought judgment on their persecutors. Moreover, God will not allow Satan to have his little temporary triumph until their witness (and that of the church) is “complete” (similar to “until the number [of the martyred saints] is complete” in 6:11). This also tells us that their prophetic ministry is twofold—witness as well as judgment. The task of the witnesses/church during this final period of world history is to maintain their witness even in the midst of terrible persecution. And the task of witness is to maintain their “conquering” perseverance and to witness even by their death (cf. 12:11).^[6]

When their prophetic witness is finished, God then allows τὸ θηρίον (*to thērion*, the beast) to attack and kill them. This creature has not appeared before in the book, but the presence of the article probably refers to previous oral teaching. John expected his readers to identify the beast as the Antichrist (see also 13:1), signified in that he is τὸ ἀναβαῖνον^[7] ἐκ τῆς ἀβύσσου (*to anabainon ek tēs abyssou*, the one who ascends out of the abyss; see also 17:8), the origin of the locust plague in 9:3–4 and the home of the “angel of the abyss” (9:11). Therefore, at the least he is a demonic figure. This demonic figure ποιήσει μετ’ αὐτῶν πόλεμον (*poiēsei met’ autōn polemon*, will make war with them [the two witnesses]). The articular form of “the beast” was probably meant as an allusion to the ten-horned “beast” and the “little horn” of Dan. 7:7–12 (also θηρίον in Dan. 7:7 LXX) who makes war against the people of God. The beast in Daniel “ascends from the sea” (Dan. 7:3, also ἀναβαίνω in the LXX), “waging war against the saints and defeating them” (Dan. 7:21, ἐποίει πόλεμον in Theodotion’s version of the LXX). Thus, John is drawing his language from the “beast” of Dan. 7. The four beasts of Dan. 7 prophesy four world empires that would dominate the Jewish people from the exile through the intertestamental period. They have been variously identified as Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greece, and Rome or simply as four empires from Babylon to Greece, culminating in the “little horn” or Antiochus Epiphanes, who in 167 B.C. forced the Jewish people to sacrifice to the Greek gods, even sacrificing a pig on the altar in the temple itself (on this figure as the Antichrist, see chap. 13). In Dan. 7:21–25 the “little horn” will “wage war and defeat” the saints (7:21) as well as “speak against the Most High and oppress” them (7:25a). God will “hand over” the saints to him “for a time, times, and half a time” (7:25b; note the “forty-two months” of Rev. 11:2).

The picture here in 11:7 reenacts the Daniel scene, as the beast not only will “wage war” against the saints but νικήσει αὐτοὺς καὶ ἀποκτενεῖ αὐτούς (*nikēsei autous kai apoktenei autous*, will conquer them and kill them). The language here is repeated in 13:7, where we are told that when the beast “wages war” and “conquers” the saints, he does so only because God allows it (also drawing on Dan. 7:21, 25).^[8] In other words, it is clear that even here God is in sovereign control. Still, this is the martyrdom portrayed in Rev. 6:9, and the beast will have his moment of triumph. The imagery of his “making war” is frequent in the book. In 9:1–11 the locusts “make war” against the earth-dwellers, and in 12:7, 17 the dragon wages war first against Michael and then against the woman and her offspring. In 16:14 and 19:19 the beast gathers the world’s armies together for Armageddon, and in 20:8 the dragon gathers Gog and Magog from the four corners of the earth for the final stand against God. However, the whole theme of the book is the futility of these acts of rebellion against God and his people. There is actually no final “war,” only a last act of defiance made by an already defeated foe, and the death of the saints is their actual victory over Satan (12:11). Martyrdom in this book is virtually a privilege, part of the “messianic woes” of the last days (see on 6:9–11). In their suffering and death, the witnesses/believers replicate the passion of Jesus and join “the fellowship of his suffering” (Phil. 3:10). In fact, it is this that turns the rejection of 9:20–21 into repentance in 11:13. As Michaels (1997: 141) says, “The familiar Christian ‘gospel,’ the story of suffering and death followed by vindication—whether of Jesus or his faithful disciples—is

what transforms the ending of the trumpet series from nonrepentance (9:20–21) to repentance (11:13)” (see also Bauckham 1993b: 276–79).

After the beast has killed the two witnesses, their “corpse” (τὸ πτώμα, *to ptōma*)[9] is left to lie “in the street[10] of the great city” (11:8). To refuse to allow burial for the dead was a terrible insult in the ancient world (see Gen. 40:19; 1 Sam. 17:43–47; 2 Kings 9:10; Tob. 2:1–8; Josephus, *J.W.* 3.8.5–6 §§376–84). This emphasizes the universal scorn heaped upon the witnesses after they are martyred. The identification of τῆς πόλεως τῆς μεγάλης (*tēs poleōs tēs megalēs*, the great city) is quite problematic. Everywhere else in the Apocalypse the phrase refers to Rome (16:19; 17:18; 18:10, 16, 18, 19, 21 = “Babylon the Great,” a euphemism for Rome; cf. 1 Pet. 5:13). It must refer to Jerusalem in this context, however, for 11:8 describes it as the place “where also the Lord was crucified,” and in 11:13 the population of the city is 70,000, the size of Jerusalem, not Rome.[11] Confirmation lies in the larger context, for it is clear that the “great apostasy” (Matt. 24:10–12; 2 Thess. 2:3) has occurred, and Jerusalem is under the power of the beast/Antichrist, who degrades the bodies of the witnesses by exposing them unburied in the former Holy City, now under his sway. It is likely that Jerusalem and Rome are combined into a single, symbolic “great city,” the capital of the new “unholy Roman Empire” headed by the Antichrist himself.[12] As Bauckham (1993b: 172) brings out, Jerusalem forfeited its place as the Holy City when it rejected its Messiah, so in Revelation that is transferred to the New Jerusalem (21:2, 10). In a secondary way, it also represents all cities that oppose God. “The ‘great city’ is every city that embodies self-sufficiency in place of dependence on the creator, achievement in place of repentance, oppression in place of faith, the beast in place of the Lamb, and murder in place of witness to God” (Krodel 1989: 226; see also Giesen 1997: 255).

John now adds that the “great city” is καλεῖται πνευματικῶς Σόδομα καὶ Αἴγυπτος (*kaleitai pneumatikōs Sodoma kai Aigypptos*, spiritually called Sodom and Egypt). The choice of πνευματικῶς seems deliberate, for the author could have used ἀλληγορούμενα (*allēgoroumena*, allegorically, figuratively), as in Gal. 4:24, if he wanted to say simply that it had a “figurative” meaning. Instead, he is pointing either to its “spiritual” nature or to what those with “spiritual discernment” realize about it. Bauckham (1993b: 168–69; also Aune 1998a: 620) translates it “prophetically” (with the NRSV) and says the “Spirit of prophecy” is speaking to the church through this image. Jerusalem is linked with Sodom in Isa. 1:9–10 (its leaders are called “rulers of Sodom”),[13] Jer. 23:14 (“they are all like Sodom to me” in their ungodliness), and Ezek. 16:46–49 (she is like “her sister Sodom”). So it is like Sodom in its depravity and rebellion against God and like Egypt in its bondage and oppression (Hos. 8:13; 9:3; Joel 3:19). Thus, apostate Jerusalem will be like Egypt in its persecution of the people of God (see Minear 1966: 93–96, who calls this a fusion of eschatological and historical realities in the interest of an ontological definition of the church and its destiny).

Finally, this “great city,” like Sodom in its rebellion and like Egypt in the enslavement and bloodshed that typified its hatred of the people of God, is the place “where also their Lord was crucified.” Αὐτῶν (*autōn*, their) most likely has the same antecedent as in the first part of the verse, the witnesses whose bodies were on display.[14] It links their martyrdom explicitly with the death of “their Lord,” in keeping with the *imitatio Christi* theme of the Gospels. The true disciple is one who is willing to “take up the cross” and follow Jesus to the death, if necessary (Mark 8:34). The “great city” had killed Jesus, and now it has killed the two witnesses, who are one with their Lord in suffering and death.

During this time, the earth-dwellers will look upon their bodies and rejoice (11:9). It is obvious that the whole world of unbelievers will participate in the celebration. In another fourfold

description (see 5:9; 7:9 [positive uses of the formula for believers]; 10:11 [which begins the negative use of the formula for the earth-dwellers, a use that will dominate the rest of the book]), John indicates that those “from^[15] every people, tribe, language, and nation” will view the bodies (note again the corporate singular τὸ πτώμα [*to ptōma*, the corpse]) and rejoice. The added “refuse them burial” emphasizes even more the utter contempt and terrible indignity the witnesses/saints must suffer. Like Jesus, they are insulted and maltreated to the greatest possible extent. Some note (Beale 1999: 595; Aune 1998a: 621–22) a possible allusion to Ps. 79:1–3, in which the nations defiled the temple and Jerusalem and “poured out their [the saints’] blood . . . round about Jerusalem, and there was no one to bury them.” The pattern in the psalm, with the defilement of the temple (= Rev. 11:2a) and the trampling of Jerusalem (= Rev. 11:2b), followed by the death of the saints (= Rev. 11:8–9) and the rejoicing of the persecutors (= Rev. 11:10), fits Rev. 11:1–10 quite well. The “three and a half days” corresponds to the “forty-two months” (= three and a half years) of 11:2 and again speaks of a short period under God’s control. This is a microcosm of the time God allows Satan and the beast for their final act of defiance. Note also how much shorter is the duration of their celebration compared to the three-and-a-half-year period for the prophetic ministry of the two witnesses.

Now the ungodly turn the occasion into a religious celebration (11:10). This verse is framed by the technical term for the persecutors, “earth-dwellers” (3:10; 6:10; 8:13 thus far), which begins and ends the verse, thus emphasizing that they live only for the things of this earth and worship the earthly gods (9:20–21). The two witnesses have reenacted the judgment ministries of Moses and Elijah and proclaimed both God’s salvation and judgment for those who reject it. They have proven once more the truth of John 1:5, “The light shines through the darkness, and the darkness can never extinguish it” (NLT). Therefore, as in John 3:19–20, those who “love the darkness more than the light . . . hate the light because they want to sin in the darkness” (NLT). Since the earth-dwellers think the beast has finally extinguished the light, they “rejoice and are glad.” As Bultmann (*TDNT* 2:773–74) points out, εὐφραίνω (*euphrainō*, be glad) is used often in the LXX and Judaism to describe cultic and eschatological joy (Ps. 18:9; 95:11; 96:1; Sir. 1:11–12), and in the NT it sometimes refers to the joy of the festive meal (Luke 15:23, 32).^[16] This could be the context here, especially with the added festive idea of “sending gifts to one another.” At the Feast of Purim, the Jewish people would give gifts (Esth. 9:18–22; also Neh. 8:10–12 at the reading of the Law), and it was common for the Greeks and Romans to give gifts at special feasts (Aune 1998a: 623 mentions gift exchanges at Saturnalia and the New Year festival of Kalends). There is a definite contrast between the joy of the earth-dwellers here and the joy of the heaven-dwellers in 12:12 (same verb). The unsaved rejoice over an earthly victory that will be very short-lived, while the saints will know an eternal joy.

The reason for the rejoicing is the demise of those who had “tormented” the earth-dwellers for so long a period. The use of ἐβασάνισαν (*ebasanisan*, tormented) points forward to the final judgment (14:10–11; 20:10) and is further proof of the principle of *lex talionis* in the book, as in 18:4–8 (“Give her as much torment and grief as the glory and luxury she gave herself,” 18:7). Those who killed the saints will suffer their own just torment for their sins. So the “torture” inflicted on the earth-dwellers for those forty-two months is a harbinger of worse to come, and the short-lived victory of the earth-dwellers is an incredible irony in light of what is soon to take place.

(b) Resurrection (11:11–12)

The “three-and-a-half-day” duration of the celebration is mentioned again (after 11:9) for emphasis; the time is cut short, as is common in apocalyptic literature, to demonstrate the

sovereignty of God over the forces of evil. There is probably also an allusion to the resurrection of Jesus on the third day. As the three years of the drought under Elijah were apocalyptically extended to three and a half years in the NT (11:6), so the time of Jesus in the tomb is linked to the three and a half days here. At this time, πνεῦμα ζωῆς ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ εἰσῆλθεν^[17] ἐν αὐτοῖς (*pneuma zōēs ek tou theou eisēlthen en autois*, the breath of life from God entered them), a direct allusion to the valley of dry bones in Ezek. 37, particularly verse 10, “Breath entered them; they came to life [the LXX says εἰσῆλθεν εἰς αὐτοὺς τὸ πνεῦμα καὶ ἔζησαν] and stood up on their feet.” In Ezekiel’s vision, Israel in exile is likened to a valley filled with the dry bones of the dead. Their return from exile is pictured as a resurrection; God “breathes life” into the dry bones/Israel (a phrase alluding to the creation of humankind in Gen. 2:7, “breathed into his nostrils the breath of life”), and they are restored to their homeland. Here the two witnesses are raised from the dead and restored to life by the Spirit. It is likely that πνεῦμα ζωῆς has a double meaning here, pointing (1) to the “life-giving Spirit” as the means of (2) the new life “breathed” into them (see also on “spiritually” in 11:8).

When the two witnesses “stood on their feet,” the joy and merrymaking of the earth-dwellers turned to **Ιόβος μέγας** (*phobos megas*, great fear). This is not reverence or awe at the intervention of God but abject terror at the power of God. Interestingly, **Ιόβος** occurs only twice elsewhere in the book, in 18:10 and 18:15, when the kings and merchants are filled with terror at the destruction of the “great city” (cf. 11:8 above), Babylon. Yet it prepares for the “terror” that leads to conversion here in verse 13.^[18] As Kraft (1974: 159) and Beale (1999: 598) note, the idea that “great terror fell on them” could allude to Ps. 105:38, “Egypt was glad when they left, because fear of Israel had fallen on them,” itself an allusion to Exod. 15:16, the Song of Moses celebrating the “terror and dread” that “fell upon” the nations due to the deliverance of God from Egypt. So the exodus imagery may well be continued here. The terror that the unbeliever feels in the presence of the mighty power of God will lead to judgment (18:10, 15) or to repentance (11:13; 15:4) depending on his or her response to God’s call to repentance (implicit in the seals, trumpets, and bowls as well as in the prophetic acts of judgment performed by the two witnesses in 11:3–6).

After the witnesses are raised to life, they are immediately taken up to heaven (11:11). The bystanders ἤκουσαν ἰωνῆς μεγάλης ἐκ τοῦ οὐρανοῦ (*ēkousan phōnēs megalēs ek tou ouranou*, heard a loud voice from heaven), and this could well be the voice of God. The phrase “loud voice” occurs 24 times in the book, but only one other place is there a “loud voice in (ἐν) heaven” (12:10) speaking, though in 16:17 and 21:3 a “loud voice from the throne” also speaks. It could also be the voice of Christ, however, perhaps the voice that summoned John to heaven in 4:1 (cf. 1:10). Of course, it could also be one of the many angels who speak with a “loud voice” in the rest of the book. Beale (1999: 598–99) sees the parallel with 4:1 as so close (the voice from heaven speaking, “Come up here”) that he interprets 11:12 along the same lines, as the commissioning of a prophet (the fourth after 1:10; 4:1–2; and 10:8–11). As such, it would recapitulate the validation of Elijah’s prophetic ministry in his ascension to heaven in a fiery chariot (2 Kings 2:11) and of Moses in his “assumption” to heaven according to Jewish tradition (Josephus, *Ant.* 4.8.48 §§320–26). While there is definitely a connection with Rev. 4:1–2, it is unlikely that the parallel lies in prophetic commissioning. The language here is much closer to resurrection scenes than to prophetic commissioning scenes. Kraft (1974: 159–60) notes the link with the ascension of Elijah but sees this as closer to Dan. 7:13 and the return of Christ.

The voice commands the two witnesses, **Ἀνάβατε ὧδε** (*Anabate hōde*, Come up here). As in 4:2, this is a call to enter the precincts of heaven, but after this the language differs from 4:1–2.

Combining the origin of the voice (heaven) with the command itself, we are told they “ascend to heaven,” and they do so ἐν τῇ νεφέλῃ (*en tē nephelē*, in the cloud). The article with “cloud” is probably anaphoric, pointing back either to the “cloud” that enveloped the mighty angel of 10:1 (so Beale 1999: 599, taking this as the same “mighty angel” who commissioned John in 10:8) or to the “cloud” “with” which Christ is soon to return (1:7). While chapter 10 is the nearer antecedent, the cloud of 1:7 (also an articular prepositional phrase) provides the better conceptual parallel. Νεφέλη appears three more times in the book in an apocalyptic context (Christ coming in judgment to harvest the earth, 14:14, 15, 16). Moreover, a “cloud” is linked to the parousia (Matt. 24:30; Mark 14:62), ascension (Acts 1:9), and resurrection (1 Thess. 4:17) in the early church. Thus, the cloud most likely refers to their resurrection to heaven.

Does this symbolize the resurrection or “rapture” of the church? If the two witnesses are symbolic of the church, this becomes a real possibility. Several (Johnson, Chilton, Beale) doubt this on the grounds that ascensions to heaven in Jewish writings refer more to the vindication of the prophet and thus “represent the church’s victory over the death blow of the beast” (Johnson 1981: 507). The key once again is the cloud. There are two primary uses of the cloud metaphor in the OT. It can (1) indicate the presence of Yahweh, as in the Shekinah presence in the pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night at the exodus (Exod. 13:21); or (2) signify the theophanic appearance of God (Ezek. 1:4), in which the cloud encircles him in majesty (Ezek. 1:28; Dan. 7:13). In both cases, there is the twofold sense of the glory of God and his deliverance of his people (Oepke, *TDNT* 4:905). Aune (1998a: 625) adds several others: (3) transport from earth to heaven (1 Enoch 14.8; 39.3; Acts 1:9; 1 Thess. 4:17; Rev. 11:12); (4) transport from one part of heaven to another (Ps. 68:4; 104:3; Isa. 19:1); (5) transport from heaven to earth, often associated with the coming of the Son of Man (Mark 13:26 par.; 14:62 par.; Rev. 1:7, 10:1); (6) a mode of enthronement (Sir. 24:4; Rev. 14:14–16). As the cloud theme develops in the NT, it is closely linked to Christ’s resurrection and his second coming (building on Dan. 7:13). Therefore, the cloud here seems to signify vindication through resurrection/rapture (so also Aune).

However, one must still question whether the resurrection of the two witnesses is to be seen as the resurrection of the church. The difficulty is in the timing. The resurrection of the witnesses does occur at the end of the three-and-a-half-year period but is still followed by the eschatological earthquake and the conversion of many spectators (11:13). Yet it is clear in 19:11–12 that the parousia occurs at the end of history, with only the battle of Armageddon to follow, and the resurrection of the church clearly occurs at the return of Christ in the NT (Mark 13:24–27 par.; 1 Thess. 4:16–17). Thus, it seems more likely that the resurrection of the witnesses is a proleptic anticipation of the “rapture” of the church rather than being the “rapture” itself. It does occur at the end of history, but the order seems to be the ascension of the witnesses, the eschatological earthquake, the conversion of many earth-dwellers, the return of Christ and rapture of the church, the final battle, and the aftermath (millennium, great white throne judgment, and the coming of the new heavens and new earth). The death and resurrection of the witnesses would be concurrent with the gathering of the armies for Armageddon (the sixth bowl, 16:12–14).^[19]

As the two witnesses are caught up to heaven, ἐθεώρησαν αὐτοὺς οἱ ἐχθροὶ αὐτῶν (*etheōrēsan autous hoi echthroi autōn*, their enemies watched them). Note the emphatic position of “their enemies” at the end of the sentence. It is clear that John wants the reader to note carefully his depiction of them as “enemies.” The term is only used in 11:5 and 11:12 in the book, and in 11:5 it depicts the “fire” that “devours” those who are the enemies of God and his witnesses. Here these same foes watch as the power of God reverses their short-lived victory and vindicates his two

witnesses. It is also interesting how often verbs of seeing and hearing occur in this scene. In 11:9 the earth-dwellers “see” their corpses and rejoice, and then in 11:11 they “watch” as the two witnesses are raised to life by the Spirit. Here in 11:12 they first “hear” the voice and then “watch” as the witnesses ascend in a cloud. The use of **θεωρέω** in both verses 11 and 12 could be critical. In the Gospel of John, this verb is used often for “seeing” as a prelude to faith (Völkel, *EDNT* 2:147), and this could be similar to the use in John. Those who are the enemies of God “watch” as his power is demonstrated in resurrection and in the destructive power of the earthquake, and then many are converted (11:13).

(c) Judgment and Repentance (11:13)

After the witnesses ascend to God, another terrible earthquake occurs. **Σεισμός μέγας** (*seismos megas*, great earthquake) occurs three times in Revelation (6:12; 11:13; 16:18; earthquakes also occur in the storm theophanies of 8:5 and 11:19), and all three times seem to refer to the final earthquake at the eschaton. The similarity with 16:18–19 is striking. Here a tenth of the “great city” (11:8) is destroyed, and in 16:19 the “great city” is split into three parts. Once more it is critical to realize that the “great city” in Revelation is an amalgamation of Jerusalem and Rome into one unholy capital city of the Antichrist. The details echo several OT passages. Ezekiel 38:19–20 describes a “great earthquake” that will overturn mountains and crumble cliffs (cf. Rev. 16:20) when Gog (cf. Rev. 20:8) attacks Israel. Zechariah 14:4 says that at the day of the Lord, Yahweh will plant his feet on the Mount of Olives and will split it in two, “with half of the mountain moving north and half coming south.” Here a tenth of the city is destroyed, and a tenth perishes, with seven thousand being about a tenth the size of Jerusalem in John’s day.^[20] This reverses the story in 1 Kings 19:18, as Yahweh told Elijah in a time of great apostasy under Ahab that he had “reserved seven thousand in Israel—all whose knees have not bowed down to Baal” (cf. Rom. 11:4). There seven thousand are set aside for God, here seven thousand perish for their idolatry and rebellion. Still, the emphasis is on partial judgment similar to the one-fourth killed in the seals and the one-third killed in the trumpets. In those judgments, the outpouring of wrath accompanied a call to repentance (see the introduction to the trumpet judgments, at 8:2–11:19), and that is also the case here. As Harrington (1993: 123) says, “Both the visible triumph of the two witnesses (‘in full view of their enemies,’ 11:12) and this mitigated punishment were meant to bring people to their senses.”

After the events of 11:11–13, the survivors **ἐμβοιοὶ ἐγένοντο καὶ ἔδωκαν δόξαν τῷ θεῷ τοῦ οὐρανοῦ** (*emphoboi egenonto kai edōkan doxan tō theō tou ouranou*, were terrified and gave glory to the God of heaven). At this point, there is a great difference of opinion as to whether this is true repentance or the forced homage of a defeated foe, as in Phil. 2:11, “At the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth.” The reason for taking this as a true repentance (so Swete; Beckwith; R. Charles; Lohse; Caird; Beasley-Murray; Prigent; Sweet; Giblin 1984: 458; Schüssler Fiorenza; Chilton; Krodel; Roloff; Thomas; Holwerda 1999: 156) lies in the two aspects, fear and giving glory to “the God of heaven.” In 14:6–7 the angel with the “eternal gospel” calls on the earth-dwellers to “fear God and give him glory,” and in 15:4 and 16:9 (see further below) this signifies the offer of salvation. In several places in the OT, the phrase “give glory to God” is used when calling people to repentance (Josh. 7:19; 1 Sam. 6:5; Isa. 42:12; Jer. 13:16). Finally, in 19:5 God’s “slaves” are defined as “those who fear him,” and in 19:7 the great multitude in heaven sings, “Let us . . . give him glory.”

However, several scholars (Hendriksen, Kiddle, Mounce, Beale; cf. also Giesen) argue that the magicians of Egypt confessed that the plagues had taken place under the “finger of God” (Exod.

8:19) but did not repent, and “fearing God” in the OT sometimes referred to those who were forced to give homage to God (Prov. 1:24–32; Jon. 1:9–10, 16; cf. Acts 12:23 in the NT). In Dan. 4:34 Nebuchadnezzar “honored and glorified” God but both before and after turned to his idols and tried to force the Judeans to join him. Since “the God of heaven” occurs three times in Dan. 4:37 LXX, Beale (1999: 604) argues that this could be an allusion to the Dan. 4 incident and mean that John “is speaking of those who acknowledge God’s heavenly sovereignty but remain unbelievers.” [21] Schnabel (1999: 9) offers four reasons for taking “give glory to God” negatively: (1) In the OT, the phrase often speaks of God’s demanding glory with no reference to conversion (1 Sam. 6:5; Ps. 96:7–8; Isa. 42:12) or even in a judgment context (1 Enoch 62.6–13; 63.2–12); (2) the glorification of God does not result from missionary proclamation but from judgment, so it is a judgment doxology; (3) the Nebuchadnezzar parallel from Dan. 4 was not true repentance; (4) the great earthquake of Rev. 11:13a is a judgment motif. However, the connections within the Apocalypse make it more probable that John is speaking of true repentance here. As argued above (cf. introduction to the seals at 6:1–8:1, and 9:20), one of the themes in the seals, trumpets, and bowls is judgment as part of God’s final offer of repentance to the nations. In 15:4 as the nations “come and worship God,” we read, “Who will not fear you, O Lord, and bring glory to your name?” Also, in 16:9 the nations “refused to repent and give glory to him,” and in that context “give glory” means conversion, that is, “they refused to repent and be converted.” Aune (1998a: 628), who argues elsewhere against a repentance motif, calls this “a verbal indication of *conversion*. . . . Here in 11:13, giving glory to God is clearly the consequence of repentance, i.e., conversion (Loisy, 216)” (see further the discussion at 14:7).

But does this lead to universalism, the view that a portion of the hardened pagans are killed so that *all* the other unbelievers will repent? Many have come to this very conclusion (Caird, Krodel, Harrington, Schüssler Fiorenza, Bauckham 1993b: 278–83) on the grounds that the “great city” refers to all the earth-dwellers and that, therefore, everyone will be saved. Caird (1966: 140) says, “Where retributive punishment had failed to bring men to repentance, the death of the martyrs would succeed” (see also Bauckham 1993b: 278–83). However, there are several problems with this: (1) It is clearly God’s act in raising them from the dead, and not their death, that has resulted in this turnaround. (2) The “great city” does not stand for all humankind in this context but refers to that place in the story (the capital city of the beast) where the witnesses are killed. (3) The two witnesses are not just a symbol of the church but are individuals who will appear at the end of history. (4) Most importantly (the second and third depend on one’s interpretive approach), the rest of the book makes final judgment of evil humankind too critical a theme to believe that John could have intended this in a universalist direction. This refers to a portion of the earth-dwellers who repent rather than symbolizing the repentance of all the unbelievers. [22] Thus, while the majority of evil humankind remain hardened toward God, there is a portion that realizes their sin, repents, and turns to the “eternal gospel” (14:6). Here they turn τῷ θεῷ τοῦ οὐρανοῦ (*tō theō tou ouranou*, to the God of heaven), a title that also occurs in 16:11, where people “curse the God of heaven” because of their torment. As several note (Swete, Beckwith, Thomas, Beale, Aune), this title was used in Judaism to distinguish the sovereign, majestic God from the gods of the pagan world (Gen. 24:7; 2 Chron. 36:23; Neh. 1:4–5; Dan. 2:18–19; Jon. 1:9; 2 Esdr. [4 Ezra] 5:12; 6:10).

Summary and Contextualization

The ministry of the two witnesses was also intended to tell the church its part in the end-time

events. It is likely that they are two individuals who will appear at this final period of world history and reproduce the ministries of Elijah and Moses. At the same time, they are corporately identified with the church and symbolize its ministry during this period. The two aspects—prophetic proclamation, victory over their enemies followed by death and resurrection—flows right out of the prophetic call of John in 10:8–11 and the measuring of the temple in 11:1–2. It is likely that their “prophesying” in “sackcloth” parallels also that of John the Baptist—a call to repentance. The judgment miracles of 11:5–6 function like the seals, trumpets, and bowls: they show the powerlessness of the enemies of God and prove to the earth-dwellers that God is supreme. Thus, these judgment miracles also involved a call to repentance.

The death and resurrection of the witnesses (11:7, 11) parallels the death and resurrection of Christ and symbolizes the call to every Christian: “victory through suffering.” The very symbol of *imitatio Christi* in Jesus’ teaching is a willingness to “take up the cross” (Mark 8:34 par.) and die for Christ if necessary. Paul talked of the “fellowship of his suffering” (Phil. 3:10; cf. Col. 1:24), and Peter spoke of “participating in the sufferings of Christ” as the path to glory (1 Pet. 4:13; cf. 1:11). Like the two witnesses, all believers should look on suffering for Christ as a privilege and the deepest possible “fellowship” with him. Moreover, all persecution for his sake is a victory for the believer (Rev. 12:11), and it is the basis of our “reign with him” (11:15; 20:4b; 22:5). Finally, the “blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church.” The resurrection plus the earthquake that followed produce the one evangelistic victory in the book, as some among the nations are “filled with terror and glorify God” (cf. 14:6–7). This is at the heart of the mission theme in the Apocalypse. God does not send judgment just to punish the evildoers (though that is part of his intention) but also to call them to himself. Here we have the response of some, and it is a critical message to all who are persecuted today: Their suffering in reality is their triumph, and God will use that suffering to bring people to himself.

Additional Notes

11:3. περιβεβλημένοι is replaced by the accusative περιβεβλημένους in $\mathfrak{B}$ A P et al., an obvious grammatical error, probably arising from a sight error due to the following σάκκους.

11:3–6, 11–12. The movement of the tenses of the main verbs from future (11:3) to present (11:4, 5, 6) can best be answered by aspect theory. It is unlikely that this refers to a switch from the future time (the prophesying of the witnesses) to present time (the ministry of the witnesses). It is better to note Porter’s comment (1994: 44) about the future tense: it stresses “expectation,” that is, the emphasis is on what God is going to do rather than on a time frame. The present tenses, then, emphasize this intention: God is going to act through the witnesses. Interestingly, the alternation of present and future tenses continues in 11:7–10, but John switches to aorist tenses in 11:11–12. These aorists alter the perspective and emphasize the completeness of God’s action in raising the witnesses to life. As Morris (1987: 147) says, “John sees these events as so certain that he can speak of them in the past.”

11:7. ποιήσει μετ’ αὐτῶν πόλεμον: It is often said that the two witnesses cannot be actual individuals who appear at the end of history because the beast would have “made war” against a group rather than individuals. Yet this is to overstate the language used. In a sense Ahaziah “made war” against Elijah, sending three companies of fifty soldiers each after him (2 Kings 1). Moreover, the imagery behind “made war” is a constant refrain throughout the book (see above on 11:7), and so it is used here to place this scene into a larger picture. The beast “makes war” not only against the saints (12:17; 13:7) but also against Michael and his angels (12:7). There is little in this scene to obviate the idea of the beast “making war” against the two witnesses.

11:11. ἤκουσαν: Several manuscripts, including $\mathfrak{B}$ ⁴⁷ $\mathfrak{C}$ 046 and many minuscules, have the first singular ἤκουσα, but the third plural ἤκουσαν has superior external support ($\mathfrak{B}$ * A C P 2053 et al.). Moreover, the first singular appears twenty-four times in the book, and it is likely that later scribes changed it to conform to the more frequent style.

11:13. Since Jerusalem is central in 11:3–13, some (Beckwith 1919: 604; Feuillet 1964: 249–50; Ladd 1972: 159) think this is the conversion of the Jewish people mentioned in Rom. 11:25–27 on the grounds that the followers of the beast do not repent in the

book (cf. Rev. 9:20–21; 16:9, 11). However, it is clear in 11:9–10 that these “enemies” (11:12) are “earth-dwellers” from “every people, tribe, language, and nation.” To link this with the Jewish people rather than the nations does not fit the text. Also, as I have said, Jerusalem and Rome become one “great city” here. Therefore, it is best to conclude that the “enemies” who “give glory to God” are indeed a group of earth-dwellers who do finally repent.

f. Seventh Trumpet (11:14–19)

This is another difficult passage, for it announces the “third woe”; yet instead of judgment, we have a heavenly celebration of the coming of “the kingdom of our Lord” (v. 15). As a result, many believe that the contents of the “third woe” do not occur at this point but consist of the interlude of chapters 12–13 (Sweet), the seven bowls of chapter 16 (Beckwith, Walvoord, Ladd, Thomas), or perhaps the events of chapters 12–20 (R. Charles). Others say the third woe is never identified (Harrington). Those who say that 11:15–19 do indeed form the content of the third woe (Beasley-Murray, Johnson, Beale) are more likely correct. However, the judgment of the third woe is proclaimed rather than described, for this astounding vision looks back upon the completion of the “wrath” and the arrival of the threefold task of “judging,” “rewarding,” and “destroying” (v. 18; note the aorist tenses throughout). Here once more we are at the eschaton, further proof of the cyclical nature of the seals, trumpets, and bowls. We must note 10:7: “the mystery of God will be brought to completion” at the sounding of the seventh trumpet. This completion is celebrated in the hymns of 11:15–18, and there is nothing yet to come. The third woe is found in the last judgment that is celebrated in this passage. It does not look forward to chapter 20; rather, its contents are elaborated in chapter 20.

Indeed, this section effectively concludes this major section (4:1–11:19) of the book. As stated in the introduction to 4:1, the contrast between the throne of God (chaps. 4–5) and the reign of the dragon and the Beast (chaps. 12–13) make this a natural break. Moreover, the heavenly acclamation of the victorious reign of God in 11:15–19 make this a perfect conclusion for this section. Note also the *inclusio* as the twenty-four elders, not part of the action since chapters 4–5, once more sound forth in worship (see Michaels 1997: 144). Thus, this seventh trumpet forms a kind of conclusion, summarizing many themes set forth in chapters 4–11 and setting the stage for the elaboration of these themes in the rest of the book.

- i. Third woe announced (11:14)
- ii. Announcement by heavenly voices (11:15)
- iii. Hymn of twenty-four elders (11:16–18)
- iv. Cosmic events heralding the end (11:19)

Exegesis and Exposition

¹⁴The second woe is past. Behold, the third woe is coming soon. ¹⁵And the second angel sounded his trumpet, and behold, there were loud voices in heaven saying,

“The kingdom of this world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah,
and he will reign forever and ever.”

¹⁶Then the twenty-four elders who sit before the Lord upon their thrones fell on their faces and worshiped God, ¹⁷saying,
“We give thanks to you, Lord God Almighty,

the one who is and who was, ¹⁸because you have taken your great power and begun to reign.

¹⁸The nations were angry,
and your wrath has come,
namely the time for the dead to be judged,
and to give a reward to your slaves the prophets,
and the saints and those who fear your name, the small and the great,

and to destroy those who destroy the earth.”

¹⁹Then the temple of God in heaven was opened, and the ark of his covenant appeared in his temple. And there were lightnings, the roar of the storm, peals of thunder, an earthquake, and a great hailstorm.

i. Third Woe Announced (11:14)

When John says “the second woe has passed,” the reader is somewhat disconcerted, for there has been a considerable interlude (10:1–11:13) since the second woe (9:13–21). Roloff (1993: 135) says there are only two options: either a mistaken omission from an earlier draft that had included a catastrophe at this point or a pedantic annotation by a later redactor. However, these are not the only options. Those who say John intends for the interlude to be part of the “second woe” (Schüssler Fiorenza 1991: 79; Bauckham 1993b: 12) are closer to the truth (contra Beckwith 1919: 606–7; Thomas 1995: 99, who take this as rhetorical to link the material with the announcement of the third woe). The interlude added the experiences of the people of God during the time of judgment depicted in the first two woes (9:1–21) and implicitly hinted that God’s judgment on the earth-dwellers was the result of their persecution of the saints (*lex talionis*, law of retribution). Therefore, the second woe could only be finalized when the whole picture was given.

At the same time, we are told that the “third woe” ἔρχεται ταχύ (*erchetaitachy*, is coming soon). This is an interesting addition, for 8:13 and 9:12 have no such adverb as ταχύ. It can mean “soon” or “quickly,” and in this context the idea of speed would certainly fit, stressing the swiftness of God’s judgment. However, ταχύ occurs six times in Revelation, always with ἔρχεται (2:16; 3:11; 11:14; 22:7, 12, 20), and the others have a temporal element, stressing the imminence of the parousia/judgment. Also, both 8:13 and 9:12 emphasize the temporal aspect (“about to be,” 8:13; “after these” in 9:12), so that is probably the thrust here.

ii. Announcement by Heavenly Voices (11:15)

At the sounding of the seventh trumpet, a startling event occurs. The readers are undoubtedly expecting a terrible judgment to fall, especially since the “third woe” has been announced, but instead they hear a heavenly choir, following the pattern of 7:9–12, with a statement of victory and a refrain elaborating on the theme. A similar surprise occurred at the seventh seal, but there it was a silence that lasted “about half an hour” (8:1). Now the silence of the seventh seal has been reversed and has turned into a mega-symphony of sound in the seventh trumpet, as the heavenly voices shout out the turning point that the entire Bible has waited for—the arrival of the kingdom! The choir in 11:15 announces the good news, and 11:16–18 amplifies this stupendous message in an outburst of praise. The phrase ὡναὶ μεγάλοι (*phōnai megalai*, loud voices) occurs nineteen times in the book (1:10; 5:2, 12; 6:10; 7:2, 10; 8:13; 10:3; 11:12, 15; 12:10; 14:7, 15, 18; 16:1, 17; 19:1, 17; 21:3); but the only times it is used of a group are in the worship scenes (5:12; 7:10; 11:15; 19:1) and in the imprecatory cry of the martyrs (6:10). This is the only time the plural is used in the book, however, and it gives special emphasis to the incredible cry of the heavenly chorus in their hymn to God’s eschatological victory. John does not mention a “multitude” or large group of angels but simply “loud voices” to stress the hymn rather than the group that is singing. On the basis of the contents of the hymn, I conclude that this is definitely sung at the time of the eschaton when Christ returns (19:11–12). Moreover, these voices are “in heaven” and once more force a switch in perspective from the earthly (10:1–11:13) to the heavenly sphere. Just as the first advent was initiated with a heavenly choir (Luke 2:13–14), so is the second. The members, not specified here, are most likely both angelic and human.

Their song celebrates the reversal of the tragic earthly situation during the age of sin, as ἡ βασιλεία τοῦ κόσμου (*hē basileia tou kosmou*, the kingdom of the world) is finally replaced by the divine kingdom. The aorist ἐγένοντο (*egenonto*, there were) begins a string of aorists in the narrative section (11:15, 16, 19) and probably has a force similar to the aorists in verses 11–12 (see additional note), stressing certitude by looking at the future event as a completed action (R. Charles 1920: 1.294 and Thomas 1995: 106 call it a proleptic use of the aorist).^[1] The Greek is very interesting, as ἡ βασιλεία is not repeated, and τοῦ κόσμου is placed next to τοῦ κυρίου ἡμῶν (*tou kyriou hēmōn*, of our Lord). This heightens the contrast between this world and the divine reality. The kingdom is no longer “of the world” but now and forevermore is “of our Lord.” Moreover, there is an inseparable unity between τοῦ κυρίου ἡμῶν, undoubtedly God the Father^[2] and τοῦ Χριστοῦ αὐτοῦ (*tou Christou autou*, of his Christ). This continues the emphasis on the oneness between God and Jesus (see 5:6; 7:10; 11:15; 14:4; 20:6; 21:22; 22:1). The kingdom belongs to both equally. Psalm 2:2 talked of the “kings of the earth” standing “against the LORD and against his Anointed One.” Now they have been defeated once for all by the “Lord and his Messiah.”

In John 18:36 Jesus said, “My kingdom is not of this world” but “from another place.” Now that dichotomy is ended, and the heavenly kingdom has replaced the earthly as the true reality. This is a major emphasis of apocalyptic thought, that the true reality is the heavenly rather than the earthly. The wonderful message here is that at the eschaton the heavenly kingdom will be the *only* reality! It is difficult to know whether Χριστοῦ refers to “Christ” or “Messiah.” The normal rule is that the articular form refers to the messianic office, but the possessive pronoun demands the article. Still, the other places that Χριστός occurs (12:10; 20:4, 6, apart from “Jesus Christ” in 1:1, 2, 5) more likely stress his messianic office, and that is best here as well. It is the messianic kingdom that Jewish and NT expectation centered on, and it is that coming which is announced here.

The entrance of the eternal kingdom is then celebrated in the second half of the announcement. Again it focuses on the oneness of the Father and the Son. After stating that the kingdom belongs to “our Lord and his Christ,” John switches to the third-singular βασιλεύσει (*basileusei*, he will reign) to stress this oneness^[3] (for a similar use of the singular after mentioning God and Jesus, see 22:3, 4). The heavenly throne will become the earthly throne (see 22:1–2), and this will be an eternal reign. The emphasis on the eternal nature of God (1:6; 4:9, 10; 5:13; 7:12; 10:6; 15:3, 7), of Christ (1:18; 5:13), of the final kingdom (11:15), and of our eternal reign with Christ (22:5; cf. 20:4)^[4] in Revelation shows the centrality of this theme in the book. The temporal reign of sin and the temporal nature of life in this sinful world will be replaced by an eternal Godhead, an eternal kingdom, and eternal life in glory for the faithful children of God. The suffering of the people of God (6:9–11; 10:9–10; 11:2, 7–10) will result in their vindication (6:11; 7:13–17; 8:3–5; 10:7, 9–10; 11:1, 18) and resurrection to eternal glory (11:11–12, 15). The Son of Man passage in Dan. 7:13–14 stated, “His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed” (see also Ps. 10:16; Dan. 2:44; Zech. 14:9). These are now fulfilled in a final way with the coming of God’s eternal kingdom.

iii. Hymn of Twenty-Four Elders (11:16–18)

The twenty-four elders are celestial beings (see on 4:4) who with the four living creatures often lead heavenly worship in the book (4:10–11; 5:8–10, 14; 7:11; 19:4). They are ruling angels “sitting on thrones” (the only other time this is mentioned after 4:4, probably to add emphasis to the “reigning” theme from 11:15), and as elsewhere they “fall down and worship” God (see also 4:10; 5:8; 7:11; 19:4). Their purpose is obviously to submit their thrones to God and lead all in praise to

him. The submission of these high celestial beings is a major theme in this passage, highlighting the sovereignty and majesty of God. The Roman emperor had kings who were subservient to him (see 16:13–14; 17:12–14), but God was a higher being to whom all ruling authorities bowed (see also the introduction to 4:1–16:21).

The hymn of 4:10–11 celebrated the God who created and sustains this world; the hymn here celebrates the God who has ended this world and begun his eternal reign. This is the only place in the book where εὐχαριστοῦμεν (*eucharistoumen*, we give thanks) occurs, though in 4:9 the living creatures “give thanks” to God, and in 7:12 thanksgiving is part of the sevenfold praise of God by the elders and living creatures (both using the noun cognate). The cognate εὐχομαι (*euchomai*, I pray) is the basic Greek term for invocation to God, and εὐχαριστέω refers to the thanksgiving that occurs when God has responded to the prayer.^[5] In the NT the noun and verb are always used of thanksgiving to God (e.g., Rom. 1:8; 2 Thess. 2:13), and this is nowhere more appropriate than here, for God is completing his plan of salvation by ending this evil world and introducing eternity. The thanksgiving begins with the primary title for God in the apocalypse, κύριε ὁ θεὸς ὁ παντοκράτωρ (*kyrie ho theos ho pantokratōr*, Lord God Almighty), which occurs for the third time here (of nine in the book). The connotation throughout is God’s rule as Yahweh over this cosmos and his omnipotence as the “Almighty One.” It is God whose awesome power as Lord of the universe makes all this possible.

The most significant element, however, is the transformation of the threefold title from 1:4, 8; and 4:8, with its variations on the theme of the God who controls past, present, and future—“who is, who was, and who is to come.” This is an important salvation-historical description, emphasizing that God is sovereign over history. The God who was sovereign in the past will also control the future (the very message of this book), and therefore he is indeed sovereign over the present, even though the external situation makes it seem that evil is in control. The regular order occurs in 1:8 and 4:8, but in 1:4 the present aspect (“who is”) is placed first to stress that God is in control of the present as well as of the past and future (that aspect that the readers most doubted in light of Roman persecution). However, the most significant change of the threefold formula occurs here (and in 16:5), for ὁ ἐρχόμενος (*ho erchomenos*, who is to come) has been omitted. There is no more future, for God’s awesome power has acted, and his eternal reign has begun. We are at the eschaton! Beale (1999: 613) believes that this last part of the threefold title has been not just omitted but replaced by the following ὅτι clause. In other words, God’s “great power” has already acted, and the final kingdom has arrived.

The reason for this startling truth is ὅτι εἰληλας^[6] τὴν δύναμίν σου τὴν μεγάλην καὶ ἐβασίλευσας^[7] (*hoti eilēphas tēn dynamin sou tēn megalēn kai ebasileusas*, because you have taken your great power and begun to reign). The idea of God “taking” his “great power” and putting it to use is a natural aspect of his character as the “almighty” Lord. His sovereign might is exercised as he overpowers all opposition and sets up his final kingdom. It includes the overthrow of the forces of evil, the final judgment of those forces and their followers, and the establishment of the eternal kingdom. The actual event celebrated here is described in chapters 18–22, but it is the event implicitly behind the seventh trumpet. In other words, the angelic hymns celebrate the true content of the seventh trumpet, the coming of the day of the Lord. Beale (1999: 614, 932) points to background in the LXX of many psalms containing the refrain “the LORD reigns (over the nations),” e.g., 46:9 (47:8 MT); 92:1 (93:1 MT); 95:10 (96:10 MT); 96:1 (97:1 MT); 98:1 (99:1 MT). In Isa. 52:7 and Zech. 14:9, this is applied to the final eschatological reign of God.

Chilton (1987: 290–92) takes a preterist approach to this, theorizing that it describes God’s

control of the situation in A.D. 66–70, when the Romans besieged and destroyed Jerusalem. He believes God was behind that event, forcing the destruction of second temple Judaism, the great opponent of Christianity, and the final severance of Christianity from Judaism. Thus, the “reign of God” in Christianity as a world religion began. However, the cosmic dimensions of 11:17 are too broad to be relegated to such an event. Christianity began as a world religion at Pentecost and in the missionary journeys of Paul. There is no teaching in the NT to suggest such an understanding of the destruction of Jerusalem as this. Moreover, the statement in 11:18 regarding God “destroying those who destroy the earth” cannot fit such an interpretation.

The second half of the hymn begins with a quotation from Ps. 2:1, “Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain?” The object of the wrath and empty plots of the nations in this psalm is “the Lord and his Anointed One” (Ps. 2:2). God’s response in Ps. 2 is behind the next clause in Rev. 11:18, “Your wrath has come.”^[8] First, “the One enthroned in heaven laughs” (Ps. 2:4), and then he “terrifies them in his wrath” (2:5). The “nations” are the “earth-dwellers” of Rev. 11:9–10, the “enemies” of God and the saints in 11:5, 12. There is a play on words between the wrath (ὠργίσθησαν, *ōrgisthēsan*, were angry) of the nations and the “wrath” (ὀργή, *orgē*) of God.^[9] The same occurs elsewhere, as the verb is used for the anger of the evil forces (12:17) and the noun for the wrath of God (6:16, 17; 14:10; 16:19; 19:15). It is difficult to know why this is so in the book, but perhaps the anger of the nations is an act of folly, seen in specific actions (primarily in opposition to God and his people), while the wrath of God is part of his very character (arising from the two poles of his nature, justice and love), seen especially in his judgment of evil.

This is followed by a chiasm contrasting judgment (A) and reward (B):

A The time has come for judging the dead

B And for rewarding your slaves the prophets

B’ And your saints and those who fear your name, small and great,

A’ And for destroying those who destroy the earth.

It is introduced by ὁ καιρός (*ho kairos*, the time), which occurs five times in the book (1:3; 11:18; 12:12, 14; 22:10) and refers not to chronological time but to eschatological time, a period filled with the sense of God’s judgment on those who do evil and his salvation for those who live for righteousness. Here καιρός borrows the verb of the previous clause, and the καί (*kai*, and) that introduces it is probably exegetical, thus yielding the translation, “and your wrath has come, namely the time for the dead to be judged.” God’s wrath is specifically seen in the final judgment, as in the other places it occurs (see above).

Three aorist infinitives follow the idea of the God-appointed “time”: first, the dead are κριθῆναι (*krithēnai*, to be judged), then it is “time” δοῦναι τὸν μισθόν (*dounai ton misthon*, to give the reward) to the saints, and finally it is “time” διαθεῖραι (*diaphtheirai*, to destroy) the destroyers. The judgment of the dead occurs explicitly only in Dan. 12:2, “Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake, some to everlasting life, others to shame and everlasting contempt,” though a hint of this can be found in Isa. 26:19, “Your dead will live” (no actual mention of the wicked dead here) and 66:24, “They will go out and look upon the dead bodies of those who rebelled against me; their worm will not die, nor will their fire be quenched.” This is an extension of the OT theme on the judgment of the nations (e.g., Amos 1:3–2:16; Joel 3:1–19; Zeph. 2:4–15; 3:8). Yet it is a key theme in the NT (Matt. 13:36–43; 25:31–46; John 5:22, 30; 9:39; 12:31; Acts 10:42; 17:31; Rom. 1:32; 1 Pet. 4:5) and at the very heart of Revelation, especially in the final judgment of 20:11–14, which uses similar

language: “I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne. . . . The dead were judged according to what they had done. . . . Death and Hades gave up the dead . . . and each person was judged.” The “dead” here could be believers and unbelievers alike, but that is unlikely because the believers are treated separately in the next part of this chiasm.

The idea of giving τὸν μισθόν[10] to the faithful occurs only in 22:12 (“I am coming soon. My reward is with me”) elsewhere in the book. However, rewards for the “overcomer” are spelled out in each of the seven letters, and the vindication of the martyrs is promised in 6:9–11. This concept is also a critical component of early Christian thought, based on OT passages like Gen. 15:1–2; 30:18; Prov. 11:21 LXX (the faithful “receiving a reward”); Isa. 40:10; and 62:11 (Yahweh’s “reward is with” him). Jesus taught that there will be “great reward in heaven” for those who are persecuted (Matt. 5:11–12), and the reward is only for those who are faithful in their conduct (Matt. 6:1–18). In 1 Cor. 3:5–15 Paul teaches that the final “fire” at the “day” of judgment will “test” each one’s work and determine whether there is any “reward.” This idea of reward “according to each one’s work” is also an important part of this book and is explored further in 2:23; 14:13; 18:6; 20:12, 13; 22:12.

There are five terms here for those who are “given reward”: God’s slaves, prophets, saints, those who fear God, and the small and great. The relationship between these “groups” is highly debated. Several (e.g., Mounce, Krodel) see “slaves” as inclusive of all and then two basic groups, the prophets and the saints. Others (e.g., Ford, Johnson, Michaels) see three groups: the prophets, the saints, and “those who fear God.” Finally, some (e.g., Beale 1999: 617) see all the terms as descriptive of the church (with “prophets” referring to the prophetic ministry of the church, as in the prophets/witnesses of 11:3–4). While the last is possible, prophets throughout the book are a distinct office in the church (cf. 10:7; 11:10; 16:6; 18:20, 24; 22:6, 9). For instance, while in 16:6 and 18:24 one could argue that “saints and prophets” are synonymous, in 18:20 the “saints and apostles and prophets” must refer to three groups, and that makes it more likely that the same is true of “saints and prophets” in 16:6 and 18:24. The “prophets” are probably those officers of the church[11] (Eph. 4:11) who are given special oracular utterances by God for the church (so Aune 1998a: 645) and therefore function as leaders. Thus τοῖς δούλοις (*tois doulois*, the slaves) refers to both prophets and saints as “slaves” of God. While δούλος refers several times in the Apocalypse to the class of slaves in the Roman Empire (6:15; 13:16; 19:18), it is also used figuratively to depict those who have become “bond slaves” of God (1:1; 2:20; 7:3; 15:3; 19:2, 5; 22:3), often linked with the “prophets” (10:7; 11:18; 22:6). As Bartchy (DLNT 1099) points out, while the slave metaphor was repugnant in Greco-Roman religion (due to the imagery of a lack of freedom), the idea of “slaves of Yahweh” was an important part of Jewish thought to designate their special loyalty to and relationship with the Lord God (Lev. 25:55). Early Christian leaders considered the title “God’s slave” to be a badge of honor (Phil. 1:1; James 1:1; 2 Pet. 1:1; Jude 1).

The decision among the three options regarding the five designations depends on the relationship between the “saints” and “those who fear your name.” While some (R. Charles 1920: 1.296; Swete 1911: 144) have linked the latter with the “God-fearers” of Acts (10:2, 22; 13:16, 26), thus seeing them as Gentile converts, there is no evidence for this in Revelation. Therefore, the first option is best (there are two groups, prophets and saints, both called “slaves of God”). The further description of the saints as τοῖς φοβουμένοις τὸ ὄνομά σου, τοὺς μικροὺς καὶ τοὺς μεγάλους[12] (*tois phoboumenois to onoma sou, tous mikrous kai tous megalous*, those who fear[13] his name, the small and the great) is also found in 19:5 and echoes Ps. 115:13, “He will bless those who fear the LORD—small and great alike.” In Ps. 115:2–8 the psalmist contrasts dead idols with the “God in heaven,” and then in 115:9–18 he extols the joy of trusting in the Lord and fearing him. This

context fits the situation of the seven churches very well, with the problem of idolatry in the Nicolaitan cult movement (Rev. 2:14–16, 20–23). The categories of “small and great” occur frequently in Revelation (13:16; 19:5, 18; 20:12) to state that all stand before God as equals. The Lord will make no distinction between kings and slaves; he shows no favoritism in judgment or reward (Deut. 10:17; 2 Chron. 19:7; Mark 12:14; Acts 10:34; Rom. 2:11; 1 Pet. 1:17).

The third infinitive relates that it is “time” for God “to destroy those who destroy the earth” (διαθεῖραι τοὺς διαθείροντας τὴν γῆν, *diaphtheirai tous diaphtheirontas tēn gēn*). This language is picked up again in 19:2, describing the judgment of the “great prostitute who destroyed/corrupted the earth (ἐθαιρεν τὴν γῆν).” Therefore, it is likely that “those who destroy the earth” refers to “Babylon the Great,” the “great prostitute” composed of those who follow the beast (cf. chaps. 17–18). This identification is further proven by the allusion to Jer. 51:25 (28:25 LXX; so Thomas 1995: 113; Beale 1999: 616), where God says to Babylon, “I am against you, O destroying mountain, you who destroy the whole earth (τὸ διαθεῖρον πᾶσαν τὴν γῆν).” In this context “the earth” probably means the saints worldwide. For those killers of the righteous, the divine principle of *lex talionis* again mandates a punishment fitting of the crime. Thus, the “destroyers” are to be “destroyed” by God.

iv. Cosmic Events Herald the End (11:19)

The conclusion of the seventh trumpet contains an *inclusio* with 11:1–2. There the temple was measured by John, signifying God’s ownership and protection of his people. Here the “temple of God in heaven ἡνοίγη (ēnoigē, was opened),” paralleling 4:1, where “a door was opened in heaven.” Both “openings” are apocalyptic signs that the end has arrived, but the first opening was merely an anticipation of this one, the event that truly is at the end of world history. This is the closest we come in chapters 1–19 to a theophany—an actual appearance of God. What is opened here is the Holy of Holies, that most sacred place in the temple where God truly dwelt.^[14] Both the ark of the covenant (2 Sam. 6:2; Ps. 80:1; 99:1) and the storm (Exod. 19:16–19; Ps. 18:13; Isa. 30:30) are OT symbols of theophany. God is present in mercy (the ark) and judgment (the storm theophany) to bring an end to this sinful age and to introduce the eternal age of joy.

As the temple is opened in heaven, ὤθη ἡ κιβωτὸς τῆς διαθήκης αὐτοῦ (*ōphthē hē kibōtos tēs diathēkēs autou*, the ark of his covenant appears). The use of ὤθη is significant, for it occurs only three times in the book—in 11:19 (the ark), 12:1 (the “great and wondrous sign in heaven” of the woman), and 12:3 (“another sign in heaven,” the dragon). Thus, all three “appearances” are in heaven, and it is clear that God is revealing deep heavenly truths to John. Moreover, this ties together the three revelations and provides a linear movement from chapter 11 to chapter 12 (see the introduction to 12:1–14:20 for the implications of this for the outline of the book). The ark of the covenant was one of the most important symbols in the OT, at the very core of Israelite religion. It contained the two tablets of the Decalogue given to Moses by God on Mount Sinai (hence the designation “ark of the covenant”) as well as a jar of manna and Aaron’s rod that budded (see Heb. 9:4 and the several passages from Exodus alluded to there). As such it symbolized God’s covenant of mercy (the covering of the ark was called “the mercy seat” or “place of atonement”). As Hague (*NIDOTTE* 1:503–4) says, the ark was the “central symbol of Yahweh’s presence with Israel,” the heart of atonement for the nation, and the basis of its victories over its enemies. Thus, this passage is linked closely with Rev. 21:3, which in a sense explains the significance of the “ark of the covenant appearing” visibly: “Now the dwelling of God is with his people, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and

be their God.” The ark was so sacred that it was closed off by a veil from all human contact. Only the high priest could enter once a year on the Day of Atonement and then only because he represented the whole people of God. The veil was torn in two (Mark 15:38 par.), however, making access to God direct (Heb. 9:8–10, 12; 10:19–21). Now the ark in heaven is visible to all.

The ark may have been destroyed when Nebuchadnezzar’s imperial guard destroyed Jerusalem and burned the temple in 586 B.C. (2 Kings 25:8–10). Although the various pieces in the temple are described as carried away by the soldiers (2 Kings 25:13–17), the text does not mention the ark. Jewish tradition said that Jeremiah (2 Macc. 2:4–8) or an angel (2 Bar. 6.7–9) carried the ark away and hid it in a cave on Mount Nebo to await God’s final gathering of his people. Some scholars (Johnson 1981: 510; Mounce 1998: 228) doubt that this tradition has any relevance for Rev. 11:19 because this is a heavenly ark rather than the earthly one and because there is still a great deal of suffering yet to come in ensuing chapters. However, these arguments are insufficient. The heavenly ark was seen as the pattern for the earthly ark, and so there was a very real connection between them. Also, a cyclical view of the seals, trumpets, and bowls (argued throughout this commentary) would mean that the seventh trumpet is indeed at the eschaton, and that view fits the exegesis above of 11:15–18. Therefore, the expectation of the reappearance of the ark is part of the background to this text.

This is the third of four times the storm theophany (“lightnings, the roar of the storm, peals of thunder, an earthquake, and a great hailstorm”) has appeared in the book. With its background in Sinai (Exod. 19:16), it is related to the majesty of God (Rev. 4:5, the throne room vision) but especially to his sovereignty over the eschaton (8:5, the seventh seal; 11:19, the seventh trumpet; and 16:18–21, the seventh bowl). This is also connected to the cosmic signs and the shaking of the heavens in the sixth seal (6:12–14, also containing a “great earthquake”), itself a sign of the end. The addition of “great hail” to the list in 4:5 and 8:5, according to Bauckham (1993b: 204), intensifies the storm of Exod. 19:16 and adds imagery of the hailstorms of Exod. 9:13–26 (the seventh Egyptian plague); Ezek. 38:22 (Gog); and Josh. 10:11 (the kings of the Amorites). Such storms signify not only God’s majesty but his judgment as well, in effect summarizing the judgments of the seven trumpets.

Summary and Contextualization

The themes of the entire Bible coalesce on the event that is described here. Human language fails in an attempt to state its true significance. The statement of the heavenly voices relates the end of this world’s kingdom, dominated by sin and groaning in its desire for release from its “bondage to decay” (Rom. 8:19–21). More wonderfully still, they announce the arrival of the kingdom of the one God, “the Lord and his Messiah.” Jesus’ “gospel” is summarized by “the kingdom of God is near” (Mark 1:15). At the first advent the kingdom age began, but it was partial, not to be consummated until his second advent, when the final kingdom would complete God’s plan of salvation for eternity and when God would finally begin to “reign forever and ever.” Of course, God has been on his throne all along, but at this point evil will be destroyed forever, and his reign would inaugurate our eternal glory with him.

One of the great moments in the book is when the threefold formula is altered so that there is no more future (“who is to come”) because the eschaton has arrived and eternity is now to begin. The “great power” of the “Lord God Almighty” has acted, and the anger of the nations has come to nothing. “Wrath” has led the earth-dwellers to persecute and martyr the saints, but they have

emerged victorious, and now God’s “wrath” has resulted in his “judging the dead.” At the last judgment (20:11–15), two things will occur: the saints will be judged and rewarded (20:12), and the enemies of God and his people will pay for their crimes with eternal judgment (20:13–15; cf. 14:11; 20:10). Finally, at the last trumpet (1 Cor. 15:52), the temple of heaven will be opened, and the ark of the covenant will be revealed. God will live among his people, and his presence (the primary meaning of the ark) will make his covenant with his people an eternal reality.

Additional Notes

11:17. Some manuscripts (051 1006 2042 and several other minuscules as well as the TR) read **καὶ ὁ ἐρχόμενος ὅτι** (*kai ho erchomenos hoti*, and who is to come, because), undoubtedly in assimilation to the other places the threefold formula is found. Still others (□⁴⁷ ⲙ * C et al.) read **καὶ ὅτι**, and this has superior external witnesses to the favored reading, **ὅτι** (ⲙ^c A P 046 et al.). However, it could be a scribal error due to the predominance of **καί** in this hymn (ten times in 11:17–18) and its use in the threefold formula.

11:17–18. Some (R. Charles, Lohmeyer, Lohse, Krodel) believe that these verses point to the events of chapter 20, with 11:17 = the millennium (20:1–6), 11:18a = the uprising of Gog and Magog (20:7–10), 11:18b = the judgment before the throne (20:11–14), 11:18cd = the blessedness of the saints in the New Jerusalem (chaps. 21–22), and 11:18e = the final destruction of the evil powers (20:10). However, Beasley-Murray (1978: 190) notes correctly that the background in Ps. 2:1, 5 makes it more likely that this describes the anger of the nations prior to the second coming rather than to the events of chapter 20. Also, the chiastic arrangement of 11:18 (see above) makes the judgments of 11:18b and 11:18e one and the same.

11:19. **ὁ ἐν τῷ οὐρανῷ:** Several fine manuscripts omit the article (□⁴⁷ ⲙ P 046 051 et al.), and this could be the least likely reading, since it is grammatically difficult. As Metzger (1994: 672–73) points out, however, the external evidence for the reading in the text may well be superior (A C 1006 1828 2020 et al.), and “transcriptional oversight” could have caused the scribes to miss the article.

III. God in Majesty and Judgment (4:1–16:21)

A. God's Sovereignty in Judgment (4:1–11:19)

► B. Great Conflict between God and the Forces of Evil (12:1–16:21)

B. Great Conflict between God and the Forces of Evil (12:1–16:21)

The first section of the seals, trumpets, and bowls focused on the sovereignty of God on his throne (4:2–3; 5:6–7) and began with the worship of God and the Lamb in chapters 4–5. This section focuses on the throne (13:2) and the worship of the dragon (13:4, 8, 12, 14–15). Thus, here we have the great battle between God and the false trinity (16:13). While the saints are hunted down and killed (13:7), their death is their great victory over Satan (12:11; 15:2–4), and the judgment of the forces of evil is certain (14:17–16:21). Thus, while Satan's pretentious assumption of power is central, God is still sovereign, and it is clear that everything the dragon does happens only because God has allowed it (in 13:5–8 note the centrality of ἐδόθη *edothē*, was given). Still, many of the themes continue from 4:1–11:19, such as *lex talionis* (the law of retribution), the call to repentance in the judgments, the total depravity of the earth-dwellers, the call to perseverance on the part of the saints, and especially the absolute sovereignty of God.

1. Interlude: Great Conflict Described (12:1–14:20)

It is common not to label this an interlude (e.g., Beasley-Murray, Mounce, Beale) because it does not interrupt any of the judgment septets (like 7:1–17 and 10:1–11:13) and has a distinct organization. It does, however, interrupt the transition from the seventh trumpet to the bowls (there is no such passage between the seventh seal and the trumpets), and 10:1–11:13 also has a complex structure. Thus, this is the final of the three interludes and like them details the church's involvement in these end-time events. It focuses even more, however, on the activity of the false trinity (the dragon, the beast, and the false prophet/second beast, 16:13) against God and his people (12:1–13:18). Then there is a threefold summary scene on the vindication of the saints (14:1–5), the final message of salvation and judgment to the nations (14:6–13), and the harvest of the saints (14:14–16) and sinners (14:17–20).^[1] The preceding interlude (10:1–11:13) had established the call of the church to proclamation and suffering, and this section demonstrates how this calling is part of the larger conflict between the people of God and the forces of evil, namely Satan and the world.

The only hints of a supreme evil being earlier have been the “throne/synagogue of Satan” in 2:9, 13; 3:9; cf. 2:24; “Death and Hades” in 6:8, “the angel of the abyss” in 9:11, and “the beast” in 11:7. Here we have an extended description of Satan's purpose and strategy, and the triumvirate of dragon, beast, and false prophet will dominate chapters 12–20. Also, the theme of the futility of Satan becomes central. First, he is pictured as already defeated in heaven (12:7–12) and at the cross (12:11–12; cf. 5:6), and his rage stems not merely from his hatred of God but from his defeat by Christ. Second, everything he does is merely a parody or imitation of what God has already done. His “diadems/crowns” are a copy of Christ's crowns (19:12); the beast's “mortal wound” that is healed (13:3) imitates Christ's resurrection; the “great and miraculous signs” of the second beast (13:13; 16:14) imitate the “sign-miracles” of John's Gospel; and the “mark of the beast” (13:16) parodies the sealing of the saints (7:3). Moreover, the saints participate in this great victory over Satan even through their suffering. Every time Satan “conquers” them through persecution (13:7), they “conquer” him by “not loving their lives so much as to shrink from death” (12:11). The lot of the believers is one of suffering (12:13–17; 13:10), but in their faithful perseverance there is victory and vindication (14:1–5, 13).

This is the only interlude that fails to intercept one of the judgment septets (the other two are found between the sixth and the seventh seal and trumpet judgments). Instead, this introduces the bowls by describing the battle that is behind each of the judgments. Several scholars try to divide this interlude into seven sections: some (Kiddle, Morris) see seven in chapters 12–14 (12:1–6, 7–12, 13–17; 13:1–10, 11–18; 14:1–5, 6–20), while others (Farrer, Yarbro Collins 1976, Beale) see seven in 12:1–15:4 (12:1–17; 13:1–10, 11–18; 14:1–5, 6–13, 14–20; 15:2–4). As with other debates about the structure of the book, there will never be a consensus on this, but some points can be made to move the discussion forward. There must be balance between text-linguistic considerations (introductory formulas, grammatical phrasing, etc.) and thematic indicators (the way the ideas develop as the narrative continues). I do not believe that formulas like καὶ εἶδον and καὶ ἰδοὺ are determinative for the structure (see n. 1), and so I would place 15:1–4 in the next section introducing the bowls. Moreover, I agree with Bauckham (1993b: 17) that it is unlikely John is counting visions and searching for another list of seven, since in an oral culture they would be listening to the visions rather than counting them. In other words, John was not overly concerned

with having seven sections everywhere. The developing structure must determine the number of elements, and I find eight. First, chapters 12–13 are a unit, and it is not the number of elements but the remarkable structure of the narrative that matters. The organization is the same as that in 21:1–22:5, with a basic narrative of the whole story (21:1–8) followed by a series of expansions of details within the story (21:9–27; 22:1–5). Here 12:1–6 is the basic story of the conflict between the woman with her child and the dragon. This basic story is expanded via the war in heaven (12:7–12, expanding 12:4),[\[2\]](#) the war on earth (12:13–17, expanding 12:6), and the activity of the two beasts in the war (13:1–10, 11–18, expanding both 12:6 and 12:17). Chapter 14 contains three sections, not two, on the pattern of the previous paragraph. Thus, there are eight sections (12:1–6, 7–12, 13–17; 13:1–10, 11–18; 14:1–5, 6–13, 14–20), not seven (but with no numerical significance).

a. Conflict between the Dragon and God as Well as His People (12:1–13:18)

i. The Woman and the Dragon (12:1–6)

It is common to label 12:1–13:8 the heart of the book, for it establishes the core theme, the war between God/his people and the dragon/his people and between the Lamb and his counterpart, the beast. Mol (1981: 131) properly labels this “international myth,” because stories resembling this can be found in virtually every religion of the ancient world. In Egypt the mother goddess Isis is pursued by the red dragon Set or Typhon and flees to an island, where she gives birth to the sun god, Horus. In Ugaritic myth the storm god Baal defeats the seven-headed serpent Leviathan and sets up his kingdom. In Mesopotamia, Marduk, the god of light, kills the seven-headed dragon Tiamat, who had thrown down a third of the stars. In Greco-Roman myth, the goddess Leto, pregnant with Apollo, is pursued by the dragon Python. She is rescued by Poseidon, who places her in safety on an island. After Apollo is born, he slays Python. Yarbrow Collins has produced the classic study of these parallels (1976: 61–70) and concludes that the Leto-Apollo myth provides the closest parallel (70). The main question is why John would tell the story in mythical form. Yet this is not unusual in a biblical context. Titles of other gods are applied to Yahweh in the OT, like “the rider on the clouds” (a title of Baal) of Ps. 68:4, in order to say that God has conquered the other gods and taken their names. The story of Jesus the stranger who meets the two disciples on the road to Emmaus in Luke 24:13–35 is deliberately given a form similar to another Apollo myth. The purpose of this is evangelistic, to say that what the Greeks have known only as myth has now been actualized in history. One could say that the NT “demythologizes” Greco-Roman myth by historicizing it. What the pagans longed for in their myths has now become true in Jesus. Therefore, the form is both deliberate and brilliant, using what has in our time been called a “redemptive analogy” to present the gospel in such a way as to capture the interest and hearts of the non-Christian reader. As Beale (1999: 624–25) points out, however, John goes beyond these to add elements from the OT so as to fill out the truths entailed in the story. Sweet (1979: 203) and Minear (1991: 72–74) also argue that chapter 12 comes out of reflection on the curses of Gen. 3:15–20, focusing on the overcoming of those curses by Christ (e.g., v. 2 = the curse on the woman regarding the anguish of childbirth; v. 4 = enmity between the serpent and her seed; v. 10 = overcoming the curse via martyrdom). From the seminal work of Yarbrow Collins (1976: 116–45), it has been common to call the resultant narrative the “combat myth.” She argues (142) that Rev. 12 has united several themes from ancient sources to develop this story about the dragon (12:3) that produces chaos and disorder (12:4a) and then attacks the child (12:4b), the champion (12:5a) who “dies” (12:5b) but recovers (12:7a). The battle ensues and ends in victory (12:7–9a), and order is both restored and confirmed (12:10–12a), but the dragon still has his reign (12:12b–17). While not all the details have been generally accepted (see the excellent discussion in Aune 1998a: 667–76), the idea of the combat motif has been widely confirmed in the literature.

(1) Great sign in heaven, the woman (12:1–2)

(2) Other sign in heaven, the dragon (12:3)

(3) The dragon goes to war (12:4)

(4) God delivers the child and woman (12:5–6)

Exegesis and Exposition

¹And a great sign appeared in heaven, a woman clothed with the sun and a moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars. ²She was pregnant and cried out, suffering birth pangs and in great distress.

³And another sign appeared in heaven, and behold, a great red dragon having seven heads and ten horns with seven crowns on his heads. ⁴His tail swept away a third of the stars from heaven and threw them to the earth. Then the dragon stood in front of the woman who was about to give birth so that he might devour her child when she gave birth. ⁵And she bore a male son, who was destined to shepherd all the nations with a rod of iron, and her child was snatched up to God and his throne.

⁶The woman fled to the desert, where she had a place prepared by God, so that she might be nourished for 1,260 days.

(1) Great Sign in Heaven, the Woman (12:1–2)

There is an obvious contrast between the woman in 12:1 as *σημεῖον μέγα* (*sēmeion mega*, a great sign) and the dragon in 12:3 as simply *ἄλλο σημεῖον* (*allo sēmeion*, another sign). *Μέγας* occurs 194 times in the NT, with 82 in Revelation; it describes both the incredibly powerful acts of God and of the false trinity. The evil forces are called “the great dragon” (12:3, 9), “the great city” (11:8; 16:19; 18:16–17), “great Babylon” (14:8; 16:19; 17:5; 18:2–3), and “the great prostitute” (17:1; 19:2). But here the appearance of the woman is “the great sign,” not that of the dragon. The dragon is “great” (12:3) because he is characterized by malignant power, but the “sign” of the dragon is not “great” because there is no heavenly good in it, unlike the woman’s “sign.” In the Gospel of John, *σημεῖον* referred to Jesus’ miracles as “signposts” of his person, pointers to his nature that challenged the reader and called for faith. The “signs” are similar in Revelation, referring either to divinely sent symbols or great dramas depicting heavenly reality (primarily the woman, 12:1, and the seven angels with the bowl plagues, 15:1, but also the dragon, 12:3) or to the parody of Jesus’ miracles by which the false prophet deceives his followers (13:13, 14; 19:20). Here the woman and her adversary, the dragon, are “signs” that alert the reader to the key conflict of the book. There is another great contrast between the woman and the “great prostitute” of 17:1 and 19:2, who has only a pretension of majesty and greatness.

The woman is “clothed with the sun and the moon under her feet and a crown of twelve stars on her head.” This threefold description of her majesty stems from Jacob’s dreams of Gen. 37:1–9. In the first dream, the sheaves of grain bound by his brothers bowed down to him (37:7), and in the second dream, “the sun and moon and eleven stars” bowed down to him (37:9). It is generally agreed that the “sun and moon” refer to Joseph’s parents, Jacob and Leah, while the stars are his brothers (see Wenham 1994: 352). In T. Naph. 5.1–7 Levi seizes the sun and Judah the moon, and there are “twelve rays” under Judah’s feet. In Jewish literature “twelve stars” often refers to the twelve patriarchs or the twelve tribes. Beale (1999: 625–26) points out the number of places that the radiance of the sun, moon, and stars refers to faithful Israel (Exod. Rab. 15.6; Num. 2:4; 9:14; Isa. 60:19–20; Midr. Ps. 22.11–12; etc.). Therefore, it seems likely that the woman here represents Israel, the people of God (with 12:17, where she represents the church, we can conclude that she represents the whole people of God, Israel and the church).^[1] In the OT the imagery of the sun, moon, and stars has a broad spectrum of connotations, centering primarily on Yahweh’s control over the constellations (Jer. 31:35): they praise and witness to God (Ps. 19:1–4; 148:3), symbolize endurance (Ps. 72:5), and are darkened on the day of wrath (Isa. 13:10; Joel 2:10, 31; 3:15). In Ps. 104:2 Yahweh “clothes himself with light like a garment,” showing that the woman being “clothed with

the sun” connotes majesty. “The moon” in the OT signifies beauty (Song 6:10) and glory (Isa. 24:23; 30:26). The moon being “under her feet” stresses her reign or dominion. The “crown”^[2] is used in the Apocalypse to show the reign of Christ (14:14), the dominion of the twenty-four elders (4:4, 10), or the future reign of his people (2:10 [the “victory wreath” of life]; 3:11). For the rider on the white horse (6:2) or the demonic locusts (9:7), the “crown” is a temporary rule that God has sovereignly allowed the forces of evil. Thus, like the “moon under her feet,” the “crown of twelve stars” signifies the victory and glory that God has given his people. The “twelve stars” are generally taken to be the twelve tribes (Kraft, Prigent, Roloff, Thomas, Beale) or the twelve tribes and the twelve apostles (Sweet, Mounce) or the church itself (Lohmeyer 1926: 96 calls this “ideal Israel”), though some have taken this as a reference to the signs of the zodiac (R. Charles, Beckwith, Beasley-Murray, Aune). In 1:20 the “seven stars” are the angels of the churches, so here too the “twelve stars” probably represent the whole people of God. Giesen (1997: 277–78) links the crown of twelve stars with the “crown of life” (2:10), which is a sign of the eschatological conquest that God guarantees for his people.

Next (12:2) we are told that the woman is *ἐν γαστρὶ* (*en gastri*, lit., “in the womb,” an idiom for “pregnant”). In keeping with the imagery of 12:1–2, it is common to label her the “mother goddess,” but that is to give this far too much of a Hellenistic flavor. From the OT imagery, she is the “mother of the Messiah,” and so she has often been identified as Mary herself (e.g., Feuillet 1964: 257–58) or perhaps Mary as the embodiment of the church (LeFrois 1959: 21–26; James 1960: 321–22, 328–29; Grelot 1999) or as the archetypal suffering mother (Montagnini 1967: 410–14). Bruns (1964: 459–60) calls Mary “the travailing mother of the Messiah” and thus both daughter of Zion and mother of the church; and Ernst (1968: 57–59) says the woman is primarily the church, but in 12:5, 17 she is an individual, a likely reference to Mary. Yet that is too narrow; while the woman may be Mary in 12:5, even there she symbolizes the whole people of God. In other words, it is the people of God who here are about to give birth to the Messiah. Yarbrow Collins (1976: 106–7) believes the woman represents “the persecuted people of God from whom comes the Messiah.” This fits the context, since what is emphasized here are her labor pains, as she “cries out” *ὠδίνουσα καὶ βασανιζομένη* (*ōdínousa kai basanizomenē*, suffering birth pangs and in great distress).^[3] This pictures the messianic woes of the community of God and Christ. In particular, *βασανίζω* and its cognates are not found elsewhere in the NT of childbirth (and are rare outside the NT) but are used of the “distress” of the people of God under persecution (in 2 Macc. 7:13 and 61 times in 4 Maccabees it refers to the torment of the martyrs). Thus, there is a double meaning here, the birth of the Messiah and the messianic woes of the people of God throughout history as they tried to give birth to the messianic age. In Isa. 26:18 LXX similar language is used of Israel “with child writhing in pain,” trying (unsuccessfully) to “bring salvation to the earth.” Fekkes (1994: 181–82) states that Isaiah differs from Revelation in two ways: Isaiah centers on the frustration and unfulfillment of the people, while here the goal of deliverance is achieved; and in Isaiah the birth itself never occurs, while here it does. Thus, John transforms the Isaianic scene to provide resolution in the coming of the Messiah.

Israel’s deliverance is described in Isa. 27:1 with Yahweh slaying “Leviathan the gliding serpent, Leviathan the coiling serpent.” This might well be behind some of the imagery of 12:1–3. What Israel could not do, God will do through the Messiah. Aus (1976: 257–58) argues that Isa. 66:7 provides a particularly close intertextual parallel. The “great sign” of Rev. 12:1 is Isa. 7:14 (the young woman bearing a son), and the language of the anguished birth repeats Isa. 66:7 LXX, a passage interpreted messianically in Gen. Rab. 85; Lev. Rab. 14.9; and Tg. Ps.-J. on Isa. 66:7. The

emphasis here is on the woman as the persecuted church (the messianic woes).

(2) Other Sign in Heaven, the Dragon (12:3)

The image of **δράκων μέγας** (*drakōn megas*, a great dragon) has a complex background. Benson (1987: 98–101) shows how the symbol of the dragon was well known not only in Jewish contexts but also in every ancient culture (Sumerian, Akkadian, Indian, Greek, Hittite, Egyptian, and Phoenician). A **δράκων** was a “serpent” or “sea monster” usually connected with demonic powers in the ancient world. The earliest was Sumerian in the twenty-fourth century B.C. (the destruction of the seven-headed dragon), and in Canaan it symbolized all the serpent gods as the enemy of Baal. In Babylon it is a red serpent that guards the god Marduk and is featured as a dragonlike creature on the Ishtar gate. To the Hebrews there was both Leviathan and the female sea monster Rahab. In Greek mythology there is a seven-headed hydra slain by Hercules. In the LXX it is often synonymous with **ὄφις** (*ophis*, serpent). In the OT there is the serpent, Leviathan, Behemoth, Tannin, and Rahab. For instance, while in Gen. 3:1–24 the “serpent” that deceived Eve is **ὄφις**, in Exod. 7:9–12 the “serpent” or “snake” that Aaron’s rod turned into is **δράκων**, as is the “venom of serpents” in Deut. 32:33; Job 20:16 (cf. Job 26:13). Leviathan is linked with Rahab in Job 9:13; 26:12; Isa. 51:9; Ps. 89:10; and with Tannin in Ps. 74:13 (Yarbro Collins 1976: 76). Finally, **δράκων** is used for “Leviathan” of the deep in Job 3:8, 41:1; Ps. 104:26; Isa. 27:1.

Throughout the ancient Near East, the sea monster symbolized the war between good and evil, between the gods and chaos (for Ugaritic, Akkadian, Greek, and Egyptian parallels, see Yarbro Collins 1976: 77–79). Obviously, in similar fashion to the meaning of “abyss” in 9:1–2, this builds on the fact that for the nations surrounding the Mediterranean basin, the sea meant unfathomable depths and the chaos of death. Thus, Leviathan or the “dragon” came to represent all the terrors of the sea and thus the presence of evil and death. The serpent was sacred in Egypt, a symbol of Isis. Pharaoh (Ezek. 29:3; 32:2) and Nebuchadnezzar (Jer. 51:34) are each called a “sea monster” both because of their tendency to “devour” nations and because they were the enemies of God’s people. Psalms of Solomon 2.25 spoke of Rome (in particular Pompey) in terms of “the arrogance of the dragon.” Thus, it also signified nations that stood against God and his people. The dragon or Leviathan is defeated both at the beginning of creation (Ps. 74:13; 89:10 = Isa. 51:9 [“Rahab”; see above]; 2 Esdr. [4 Ezra] 6:49–52) and at the day of Yahweh (Isa. 27:1; 2 Bar. 29.4). First Enoch 60.7–10, 24 speak of the female sea monster Leviathan and the male Behemoth destroyed at the “great day of the Lord.”

Leviathan is a many-headed beast in Ps. 74:13 (“the heads of the monster”), and in the late-first-century Christian Odes Sol. 22.5, this was a “dragon with seven heads.” As the great opponent of God and the representative of chaos and death, it is natural that the “dragon” was associated with Satan. Bauckham (1993b: 193–94) makes a strong case that the identification of the imagery of the serpent, Leviathan, dragon, and Satan stems primarily from John himself. There is no evidence in Jewish literature or the NT elsewhere for such an identification, the closest being Rom. 16:20, where Paul seems to conflate Gen. 3:15 (serpent) with Ps. 74:13 (Leviathan): “The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet.” In the NT **δράκων** occurs only in Revelation, where it is the primary designation for Satan (12:3, 4, 7 [twice], 9, 13, 16, 17; 13:2, 4, 11; 16:13; 20:2). The serpent as the arch-deceiver in Gen. 3 certainly provided the primary background. The dragon is **πυρρός** (*pyrros*, red), a color associated with dragons in Egyptian and Babylonian texts (see R. Charles 1920: 1.318–19; Lohmeyer 1926: 97). It symbolizes Satan slaughtering (cf. the “slaughtered” Lamb, 5:6) the people of God, as in the “red horse” of 6:4 and the shedding of “the blood of the saints” (16:6;

17:6; 18:24) by Satan's followers. Jesus called Satan "a murderer from the beginning" (John 8:44), and the dragon is personified in "Death and Hades" (Rev. 1:18; 6:8; 20:13, 14).

The dragon has "seven heads and ten horns." The image of seven heads stems from apocalyptic tradition, with the "many heads" of Ps. 74:13 paralleled by the "seven heads" of the serpent Lotan in Ugaritic mythology and the seven-headed monster in Jewish apocalyptic (see the texts in Day 1985: 12–14; Bauckham 1993b: 188). Most likely, the meaning of the "seven heads" is the dragon's pretension to sovereignty over the earth. This is further exemplified in the "seven diadems" on the heads. Διάδημα (*diadēma*, diadem, crown) refers to the ruler's crown (see the discussion of στέφανος in 12:1–2) and is Satan's "great imitation" of the true crowns of Christ in 19:12. Satan is called "the prince of this world" in John 12:31; 14:30; and 16:11; the "ruler of the kingdoms of the air" in Eph. 2:2; and the "god of this world" in 2 Cor. 4:4. Revelation makes clear, however, that Satan's is a temporary reign, and he is sovereign only over his followers. His defeat at the cross was final, and he "knows his time is short" (Rev. 12:12). His rule is temporary, finite, and ultimately illusory. The ten horns allude to the fourth beast of Dan. 7:7–8, 20, 24. In Daniel the horns are "ten kings" coming from the fourth empire, and three of them are conquered by the "little horn" (vv. 20, 24). In Rev. 17:12–14 the "ten horns" here are also ten kings, who both receive authority from the beast (the "little horn" of Daniel) and give that authority back to him. In the ancient world, κέρατα (*kerata*, horns) symbolized strength, especially military prowess. In 5:6 the Lamb is described with "seven horns" as the conquering ram, so the ten horns of the dragon are another great imitation, a parody of the military strength of Christ.

(3) The Dragon Goes to War (12:4)

The heavenly drama continues as the dragon goes to war first against the hosts of heaven (war in heaven) and then against the woman and her child (war on earth). First, he uses ἡ οὐρὰ αὐτοῦ (*hē oura autou*, his tail) in similar fashion to the "tails" of the scorpions that tortured the earth-dwellers for five months in 9:10. In antiquity the tail of a dragon was often a weapon, as here. With his tail the dragon σύρει (*syrei*, sweeps away)^[4] a "third of the stars." Σύρω is a strong verb that pictures a "dragging away" of individuals or fish (John 21:8; Acts 8:3), always to a negative end. This echoes Dan. 8:10, where the little horn "grew until it reached the host of the heavens, and it threw some of the starry host down to the earth and trampled on them." This little horn was Antiochus Epiphanes, whose war against the Jewish people Daniel depicted as a war against the heavenly host.

There are four main interpretations of the scene here: (1) Mounce (1998: 233) believes this has no special meaning and is simply "reporting a great pageant enacted in the sky," but surely the scene has more significance than this. (2) Others (e.g., Malina 1995: 139) believe it is an astrological drama, with the planets going to war against the stars, resulting in a shower of falling stars. While this is certainly astral imagery, there is again insufficient evidence for the zodiac supplying the background in this context. (3) Still others (Johnson 1981: 515; Beale 1999: 635–36) believe that the Daniel imagery means the stars here are not heavenly beings but earthly, namely the people of God who are trampled by Satan and his followers. Beale (1999: 635) argues that in Daniel angels often represent the saints (10:20–21; 12:1, 3), and so Antiochus's attack on Israel in Dan. 8:10 is represented as an attack on the heavenly army itself. Therefore, the fall of the stars here in 12:4 does not refer to fallen angels but rather to the persecution of God's people by the dragon. However, while it is generally agreed that Dan. 8:10 pictures the attack on Israel as a war against the heavenly host, it is also generally held that the "stars" in Dan. 8:10 are primarily angels rather

than the people of God (see Goldingay 1989: 209–10). While Dan. 12:3 says the faithful “will shine . . . like the stars forever and ever,” it does not say they *are* stars. Also, in the Apocalypse, whenever ἀστέρες (*asteres*, stars) refers to beings, they are always angels (1:16, 20; 2:1; 3:1; 9:1; 22:16 [Christ as “the Morning Star”]). There is no instance when the people of God are called “stars.” (4) Therefore, Satan sweeping away a “third of the stars” most likely refers to the original war in heaven. In that primordial event, Satan and his followers (one-third of the heavenly host) rebelled against God. In chapter 12 this battle is viewed from two vantage points. The dragon ἔβαλεν αὐτοὺς εἰς τὴν γῆν (*ebalen autous eis tēn gēn*, threw them to earth). Here the dragon is the aggressor, and this seems to signify an early victory in the war. However, in 12:7–9, which probably expands this scene, Satan and his angels were thrown out (ἐβλήθη, *eblēthē*, in 12:9, the same verb as 12:4) of heaven to earth by Michael and the heavenly host. Probably 12:4 refers to the initial victory as Satan convinced a third of the heavenly host to join him in the rebellion against God, and 12:7–9 refers to the actual battle when they are cast out of heaven to earth.

Second, the dragon goes to war against the woman and her child. After the expulsion from heaven, the dragon ἔστηκεν[5] ἐνώπιον τῆς γυναικός (*hestēken enōpion tēs gynaikos*, stands before the woman) in order to καταλάβῃ (*kataphagē*, devour) her child as soon as he is born. As Thomas (1995: 125) points out, the idea of a serpent/dragon “standing” seems unusual to us (especially in light of Gen. 3:14, cursing him to “crawl on his belly”), but in the ancient world this was the usual posture of a dragon waiting to devour someone. Such evil intentions toward children were sadly quite frequent in the OT (Gen. 12:10ff.; 26:1ff.; Exod. 1:15–16; Lev. 18:21; 2 Kings 16:3; 2 Chron. 22:10; 28:3; Ezek. 16:20), but the primary parallel is of course Herod’s “slaughter of the innocent” children at Bethlehem (Matt. 2:16). While some have seen in this picture the persecution of the saints, it is certainly not that so much as Satan’s attempts to kill Jesus, not only after his birth in Bethlehem but also in the plots of the Jewish leaders (Mark 3:6) and the attempts to arrest and kill him (John 7:30, 44–48; 8:58–59). The child “about[6] to be born” of the woman is Jesus the Messiah, not the people of God.

(4) God Delivers the Child and Woman (12:5–6)

The narrative omits all details of Christ’s life, ministry, and death and moves directly from his birth to his ascension. As Beale (1999: 639) points out, such abbreviation or telescoping of events is common both elsewhere in the NT (John 3:13; 8:14; 13:3; 16:5, 28; Rom. 1:3, 4; 1 Tim. 3:16) and in Revelation itself (1:5; 2:8; 17:8). There is a logic to the omission, for his destiny to rule is linked closely with his ascension and exaltation. The infant is presented as υἱόν ἄρσεν (*huion arsen*, a male son), with the emphasis on his male sex.[7] It is possible that the death of Christ is hinted in ἄρσεν, as the sacrifice’s maleness is emphasized often in OT contexts (Exod. 12:5; Lev. 1:3; 4:23; 22:19; Mal. 1:14), and his resurrection may be suggested in ἡρπάσθη (*hērpasthē*, caught up), but that stretches the imagery too far. More likely, ἄρσεν alludes to Isa. 66:7 LXX, where ἔτεκεν ἄρσεν signifies the rebirth of Israel out of the travails of the captivity. The salvation and deliverance of the people of God is centered on the coming of the Messiah.[8]

This “male child” is “destined” (μέλλει, *mellei*; cf. n. 6 above) ποιμαίνειν πάντα τὰ ἔθνη ἐν ῥάβδῳ σιδηρᾷ (*poimainein panta ta ethnē en rhabdō sidēra*, to shepherd all the nations with a rod of iron). This is a quote from Ps. 2:9, which is also quoted in Rev. 2:27 of the church ruling with Christ and in Rev. 19:15 of the coming of Christ to “strike down the nations.” As discussed at 2:27, it pictures the shepherd’s club “dashing [the nations] to pieces like pottery.” Thus, we have moved from the birth to the ascension to the parousia in one fell swoop, for it is clear in 19:15 that this will

not occur until the eschaton. The “nations” are the earth-dwellers, the inhabitants of “Babylon the Great,” who will follow and worship the beast (13:7–8; 14:8; 17:15; 18:3, 23). They are to be destroyed by the sword from Christ’s mouth (19:15). First, however, they become the means by which the dragon persecutes the “woman,” here undoubtedly the whole people of God, the church.

As the dragon moved to perform his deadly mission, however, the child ἡρπάσθη (*hērpasthē*, was snatched up),^[9] a strong verb that BAGD (109) defines as “take suddenly and vehemently.” It is used in Matt. 11:12 of “forceful people” trying to “seize” the kingdom for themselves, in 2 Cor. 12:2 of Paul being “caught up to the third heaven,” and in Jude 23 of “snatching” others “from the fire,” meaning to save them from the heretics. Thus, this is a particularly strong verb describing the resurrection in terms of God (another divine passive) “snatching” Jesus to himself. This is a passage about cosmic conflict. In the battle Satan has tried to “devour” Jesus (v. 4), but God has “snatched” him up in victory through his resurrection. Beale (1999: 639) is correct when he interprets this of Jesus’ death (Satan’s attempt to “devour him”) being thwarted by his resurrection. The text adds that the child was caught up not only “to God” but πρὸς τὸν θρόνον αὐτοῦ (*pros ton thronon autou*, to his throne), further anchoring the statement that Christ will “rule all the nations” above (see 5:6 for the Lamb on the throne and 22:1 for “the throne of God and of the Lamb”).

It is presupposed that the dragon in 12:6 then turned his attention to the woman (see 12:13 below), for she ἔφυγεν εἰς τὴν ἔρημον (*ephygen eis tēn erēmon*, fled into the desert). Preterists (Chilton, Ford, Mounce) see here the flight of Christians from the siege of Jerusalem to Pella in A.D. 66, as recounted in Eusebius, *Eccl. Hist.* 3.5; but this is a cosmic scene, not simply the report of one occurrence. Idealists (Hendriksen, P. Hughes, Beale) believe it describes God watching over the church today in the midst of persecution, but that depends on a prior determination of the significance of the “1,260 days” imagery.^[10] In the NT the ἔρημος symbolizes not just testing and trial but also divine comfort and protection. While the Jewish people were tested for forty years in the wilderness, they were also cared for by God that entire time (Exod. 16:32; Deut. 1:31; 8:3; Ps. 78:52; cf. John 6:31; Acts 7:36). This theme of care in the desert stemming from the exodus became a common motif, as seen in the case of David (1 Sam. 22:1–2), Elijah (1 Kings 19:3–9), and Jesus (Mark 1:12–13). Hosea 2:14 describes the restoration of Israel in these terms: “Therefore I am now going to allure her; I will lead her into the desert and speak tenderly to her”; and Qumran looked on its place in the Dead Sea wilderness in this light as well (1QS 8.12–14). Jesus often went into the wilderness to be alone with God (Mark 1:35; Matt. 14:13; Luke 4:42; 5:16). Kittel (TDNT 2:659) recounts a Jewish tradition that flight into the ἔρημος will initiate the coming of the final kingdom (*Pesiqta de Rab Kahana* 49b; Josephus, *J.W.* 2.13.5 §§261–62; 6.6.2 §351; 7.11.1 §438). That provides important background to the scene here. Therefore, I believe the futurist view is primary here. It describes the church during the final period of human history, when Satan and his agents lead the final terrible persecution, as seen in Rev. 11:13–13:18.

As the dragon pursues them, the woman/church is taken to τόπον ἡτοιμασμένον ἀπὸ τοῦ θεοῦ (*topon hētoimasmenon apo tou theou*, a place prepared by^[11] God). Ἐτοιμάζω is often used in the Apocalypse to describe the sovereign action of God (9:15; 16:12; 21:2) and here means that God has made ready a place of nourishment and protection for his beleaguered people. In this place of divine comfort, she τρέφωσιν (*trephōsin*, is nourished), a present tense verb to stress God’s continual care of the church during that period. Beale (1999: 648) believes τόπος signifies “an invisible geographical area of cultic security like the temple of 11:1–2” on the grounds of its use in

2:5 for the “place in the temple.” The context does not yield such a cultic reading, however, and Beale (643–44) is closer to the meaning when he points to the imagery of the “wilderness table ‘in the presence of their enemies’” in Ps. 23 and 78. This is the “place” where God “feeds” his saints in the midst of terrible opposition. It is important once more to realize that this does not mean the people of God will be protected from persecution or martyrdom (see Rev. 6:9–11; 10:8–10; 11:2, 7–8; 13:7) but rather indicates spiritual nourishment and protection. Satan will kill them but in turn be defeated by them (12:11). The “1,260 days” is the third of five delineations of the three-and-a-half year period that depicts this final stage of human history (“42 months” in 11:2; 13:5; “1,260 days” in 11:3; 12:6; and “time, times, and half a time” in 12:14). As elsewhere it refers back to Dan. 7:25 and 12:7 and the prediction of the last act of defiance against God. Here it means that the day of evil is short, temporary, and strictly controlled by God. The dragon will be allowed his brief period of final rebellion, but the people of God will be watched over by God throughout the entire time. Satan will be allowed to “kill the body” but not the “soul” (cf. Matt. 10:28).

Summary and Contextualization

Spiritual warfare is all too often neglected in the life of the average Christian. It seems as if we are all trying to be Switzerland and remain neutral in this war. To be neutral is to lose, however, for Satan is real, and his hatred toward all who are made in the image of God dare not be ignored. Revelation 12 is one of the most important passages in the Word of God for studying the doctrine of demonology. We learn in the basic story in 12:1–6 that Satan is the “dragon,” the Leviathan of the OT. At the same time, we realize that his “glory” is self-made and in total contrast to the “woman,” who personifies the people of God. She has the true glory, for she, not the dragon, is “clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet.” Moreover, her “crowns” reflect the royalty she has received from Christ as a “kingdom and priests” (1:6; 5:10), while the “diadems” of the dragon are only a parody or imitation of the “diadems” of Christ (19:12). Hers is a “great sign” while the dragon’s is merely “another sign” (12:1, 3). The purpose of the dragon is to thwart the plan of God. He has already subverted a third of the angelic host, and he now tries to destroy the male child, the Messiah, born of the woman. As throughout history, however, God intervenes and defeats the dragon’s evil intention by snatching up the Messiah to himself. Thus the dragon turns his attention to the woman, but she flees to the desert, the place of divine protection, where God has prepared a place for her. This refers to God’s spiritual protection of the saints, the security he provides them in the midst of Satan’s evil attempts to “devour” the saints (1 Pet. 5:8).

Additional Notes

12:1. Ἀστέρων δώδεκα: Many scholars have linked this with the twelve signs of the zodiac. Kroll (1989: 238; contra Roloff 1993: 145) sees this as the constellation Virgo with the moon at her feet and the stars above her head. In a first-century setting, with the positive attitude of many Jewish writers toward astrology, this is indeed possible, but it seems to be stretching the imagery of this passage too far. There is insufficient contextual evidence for astrological imagery here. The OT background for the “sun, moon, and twelve stars” is much more appropriate.

12:5. υἱὸν ἄρσεν: Johnson (1981: 515) has an excellent discussion of the frequent tendency in history to see a corporate identity between the “male child,” Christ, and the people of God. This was the view of Tyconius (d. 390), Quodvultdeus (d. 453), Pseudo-Augustine (d. 542), and Primasius (d. 552), while Methodius (d. 312) and the Venerable Bede (d. 735) saw the male child as referring only to the saints. Christ and the saints are certainly connected in this book (1:5, 6; 2:26–27; 11:15), but this means that the saints rule with Christ, not that they are fused with Christ. As Johnson says, “It is difficult to see how the child as well as the woman could

be a group of believers.”

ii. War in Heaven (12:7–12)

There are two parts here, the first elaborating the battle between the dragon and the forces of God in 12:1–6 (12:7–9), and the second the response of those in heaven to that victory (12:10–12). Regarding the cosmic war itself, did it occur in the primeval past or at the cross? The view here is that it did occur in the past and that the serpent in Gen. 3 was a tool of Satan (thus the dragon metaphor here). Therefore, I believe 12:7–9 elaborates 12:4 regarding the war in heaven, telling what actually happened. The voice in heaven celebrates the victory (= “salvation,” 12:10) and speaks of the great defeat of the dragon by the saints (12:11), then the rage experienced by the defeated “devil” (12:12). Youngblood (1998: 26–31) argues that while Isa. 14:12–15 referred to the fall of the king of Babylon, the rampant evil and the fall from heaven there made it a natural as background for 12:7–9. It thus depicts the fall that is the heart of this story.

(1) War described (12:7–9)

(2) Heavenly hymn celebrating victory (12:10–12)

Exegesis and Exposition

⁷And there was war in heaven. Michael and his angels went to war against the dragon, and the dragon and his angels fought back. ⁸But he was not strong enough, nor was there still found any place for them in heaven. ⁹So the great dragon was thrown out—the ancient serpent, called the devil and Satan, who deceives the whole world. He was thrown to the earth, and his angels were thrown with him.

¹⁰Then I heard a great voice in heaven saying,

“Now has come the salvation and power and the kingdom of our God
as well as the authority of his Messiah.

For the ῥ accuser ῥ of our brothers and sisters has been cast down,
the one who accuses them before our God day and night.

¹¹They conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony.
They did not love their lives even to the point of death.

¹²On account of this, rejoice, heavens and those who tabernacle in it;
but woe to the earth and to the sea,
for the devil has descended to you having great wrath,
because he knows his time is short.”

(1) War Described (12:7–9)

As stated above, the πόλεμος ἐν τῷ οὐρανῷ (*polemos en tō ouranō*, war in heaven) expands 12:4a, which stated that the dragon “swept away a third of the stars and threw them to earth.” There it was told from the standpoint of the dragon’s action; here the whole story is told. The emphasis is clearly on the cosmic “war in heaven.”^[1] Not only are we told that Michael and his angels started τοῦ πολέμῃσαι (*tou polemēsai*, to make war)^[2] against the dragon, but we are also told that the dragon ἐπολέμησεν (*epolemēsen*, made war) in return. It is common today (Caird, Krodell, Mounce, Michaels) to deny any association with the original fall of Satan on the grounds that such an event is never described in Scripture. It is true that the OT never mentions the fall of Satan, but Jewish tradition contains a story of a primordial fall (1 Enoch 6–11, 86; 2 Enoch 29.4–5 [the longer version, which some think a Christian interpolation]; Sib. Or. 5.528–29; see further below). Moreover, Jesus says, “I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven” (Luke 10:18), which with its past tense referent

probably describes Satan's original expulsion from heaven (see Bock 1996: 1006–7). In many intertestamental writings, this expulsion occurred at creation, with the defeat of Leviathan, and for others it occurred in the Gen. 6:1–4 incident (see below). Still, Bauckham (1993b: 186) says, "The defeat of the dragon (12:7–9) is doubtless the same event as the victory of the Lamb (5:5–6), and both are to be located in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ" (so also Caird 1966: 149–50; Beale 1999: 636–37). On the other hand, Thomas (1995: 128–29) argues that this battle is part of the end-time events and occurs at the beginning of the final three-and-a-half-year period. This has the benefit of fitting the appearance of the beast in chapter 13. However, Aune (1998a: 695) states, "The myth of the heavenly battle between Michael and Satan resulting in the defeat and expulsion of Satan and his angels from heaven (12:7–9) is narrated as an *eschatological* event in 12:9 . . . but as an exclusively *primordial* or *protological* event in early Jewish and Islamic literature, a motif based on Isa. 14:12–15." I argue below that this primordial fall is the primary thrust of 12:7–9. It is likely, however, that the telescoping of time in chapters 11–12 continues here, and all three "bindings" of Satan (in the primordial past, at the ministry and death of Jesus, and at the eschaton) are intertwined in chapter 12. Still, the imagery in 12:7–9 is drawn not so much from the second or third bindings as from the first, though it has implications for all three.

It is crucial to note that the two adversaries are not the dragon and God but the dragon and Michael. There is no true dualism in this book between Satan and God, for there is no equality. The dragon's adversary is the archangel Michael, and he is the more powerful. It is Michael and "his angels" who "go to war against the dragon." In the OT Michael is mentioned only in Dan. 10:13, 21; and 12:1, where he is a "chief prince" (apparently of the heavenly army) who will fight against the "prince of Persia" (probably an evil angel). His role in Scripture is a military one, fighting against the cosmic forces behind Persia on behalf of Israel (10:13, 21) and saving the faithful people in Israel from the "distress" of the last days (12:1). There he is the "great prince who protects" Israel and in verse 2 delivers "everyone whose name is found written in the book." This is the "book of truth" in 10:21 (cf. Exod. 32:32; Deut. 29:20; Ps. 9:5; 51:1; Mal. 3:16), paralleling the "book of life" in Rev. 3:5; 20:12; 21:27. Thus, Michael became the guardian angel of Israel (1 Enoch 20.5; T. Moses 10.2 [though not named explicitly]), the "chief officer" of heaven's armies (2 Enoch 22.6) who will defeat the enemies of Israel, the "Kittim" (1QM 9.14–15; 13.10–13; 17.6–8). He is also the "intercessor" for Israel who goes before God against their enemies (T. Levi 5.5–6), the "mediator" who opposes the "kingdom of the enemy" (T. Dan 6.2), and the legal advocate who defeats the devil in the heavenly court of law (Exod. Rab. 18.5; Midr. Ps. 20.3).^[3] He fought against Satan for the body of Moses (Jude 9), possibly because Satan demanded the body since Moses had murdered the Egyptian (Exod. 2:12). Finally, he is the first (perhaps the chief) of the four archangels (with Raphael, Gabriel, and Phanuel) who stand before the throne of God (1 Enoch 40.9–10) and who will seize the kings of the earth and cast them into God's fiery furnace (1 Enoch 54.6).

The πόλεμος between the forces of God and those of the dragon has an interesting history. The defeat of Leviathan/the dragon (see further on 12:3) at creation is attested in Ps. 74:13–14, and the imagery is also used of the defeat of Rahab/the dragon at the exodus (Isa. 51:9–10). As Bauckham (1993b: 187) points out, "the chaos dragon" came to symbolize Israel's enemies like Egypt (Ezek. 29:4–5; 32:3–8) or Babylon (Jer. 51:34) but also the "ultimate forces of evil behind all . . . opposition to God." Isaiah 24:21 states that at the day of Yahweh he will "punish the powers in the heavens above and the kings on the earth below," and Isa. 27:1 adds that "in that day the LORD will punish with the sword . . . Leviathan the gliding serpent, Leviathan the coiling serpent." It is possible that the language of Isa. 14:12, describing the fall of the king of Babylon ("How you have fallen from

heaven, O morning star, son of the dawn”), is drawn from a description of the fall of the dragon (as it was interpreted in later Jewish tradition). Testament of Dan 5.10–13 tells how the Lord will “make war against Beliar” (cf. 2 Cor. 6:15, where it is another name for Satan) and “free the souls of the saints” so that they will “refresh themselves in Eden” (cf. Rev. 22:1–5) and “rejoice in the New Jerusalem” (cf. Rev. 21:1–27). Second Enoch (recension J) 29.4–5 provides a close parallel to Revelation, saying that on the second day of creation “one from the order of the archangels deviated, together with the division that was under his authority. . . . And I hurled him out from the height, together with his angels.” Another text that sees this expulsion at creation is Adam and Eve 13.1–2, where the devil complains to Adam, “It is because of you that I have been thrown out of there. When you were created, I was cast out from the presence of God and was sent out from the fellowship of the angels.” The expulsion of the demons from heaven is linked not only with creation (above) but also with the Gen. 6:1–4 incident, when the “sons of God” cohabited with women and bore “heroes of old” (cf. Jub. 5.1; 10.1–2; 1 Enoch 6.1–7.6).

This image of war against the forces of evil continues in the NT. Paul spoke of the victory of Christ at the cross in terms of cosmic war, utilizing the imagery of a Roman victory and the “triumph” that ensued: “And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross” (Col. 2:15). This imagery of cosmic war continues in the “armor of God” passage in Eph. 6:10–18, describing the spiritual battle of the believer as a “struggle . . . against the rulers, the authorities, the powers of this dark world, the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms” (v. 12). The battle of Christ on the cross and of the saints in their struggle against evil reflects the primeval victory against Satan here in Rev. 12:7–9 and will culminate in the final victory at the eschaton, a victory that is at the heart of the Apocalypse (cf. chaps. 17–20).

In conclusion, there are two reasons why the theory of an original expulsion of Satan from heaven at the dawn of history is preferable: the OT teaching of the defeat of Leviathan/the serpent at creation and the Jewish tradition of an original expulsion in keeping with the Gen. 6:1–4 incident. In this light Jesus’ statement in Luke 10:18 (“I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven”) could well be a vision of this original fall.

In the cosmic war, however (12:8), the dragon **ΟΥΚ ΊΣΧΥΣΕΝ** (*ouk ischysen*, was not strong enough). Beale (1999: 652) points out the interesting parallels between 12:7–8 and Dan. 10:20; 7:21 LXX. In Dan. 10:20 the son of man (accompanied by Michael) “made war” (also **ΤΟΥ ΠΟΛΕΜΗΣΑΙ**) against “the ruler of Persia,” and in 7:21 the little horn “makes war against the saints” and “is too strong” (also **ΊΣΧΥΣΕΝ**) for them. While Dan. 7:21 depicts the defeat of the saints by the beast (= the little horn of Daniel), the text here reverses Daniel and depicts the defeat of the dragon by Michael. In a sense, Dan. 7:21 shows the beast “conquering” the saints (= Rev. 13:7), while Rev. 12:11 shows that the dragon has already been conquered on behalf of the saints. This continues a major theme of the book, the futility of Satan. While he is “the god of this world” (2 Cor. 4:4) and the “ruler of the kingdom of the air” (Eph. 2:2), he is an already defeated foe whose doom is certain (Rev. 12:12). He was “not strong enough” for Michael, and his defeat of the saints is merely the destruction of the physical body, leading to his own defeat at their hands (12:11).

As a result of the defeat in heaven, **ΟΥΔΕ ΤΟΠΟΣ ΕΥΡΕΘΗ ΑΥΤΩΝ ΕΤΙ ΕΝ Τῷ ΟΥΡΑΝῳ** (*oude topos heurethē autōn etien tō ouranō*, no place was found for them any longer in heaven). As Beale (1999: 646) points out, this reflects Dan. 2:35 Theodotion (with **ΤΟΠΟΣ ΟΥΧ ΕΥΡΕΘΗ ΑΥΤΟΙΣ**), in which a stone (taken by many Jewish commentators as the Messiah) strikes and destroys the four world kingdoms. In other words, the dragon and his followers are destroyed, and no place can be found

for them in heaven. In keeping with the discussion of the three bindings in 12:7, this occurs in three stages: at the original expulsion from heaven, in the death and resurrection of Christ, and in the final destruction of Satan and his angels in the lake of fire.

Thus, the “great dragon” (an allusion back to 12:3) ἐβλήθη (*ēblēthē*, was cast) out of heaven (12:9). This is probably another divine passive, stating that God was the active force behind Michael in expelling Satan from heaven. The verb reflects 12:4b, where Satan “cast” out a third of the stars from heaven. Here also we have another application of *lex talionis* (the law of retribution), for what Satan did to the fallen angels has now been done to him. John identifies the dragon in the most extensive NT description of who he is (see also 20:2). First, he is ὁ ὄφις ὁ ἀρχαῖος (*ho ophis ho archaios*, the ancient serpent), a phrase that clearly identifies the dragon with the “serpent” that deceived Eve and led her to eat the forbidden fruit (Gen. 3:1–15). In 3:1 the serpent was called “more crafty than any of the wild animals,” and that becomes the predominant characteristic of the serpent in the Bible, a cleverness that deceives people. It is common today to think of Satan as a being of power, but that is not quite the biblical portrayal. His power is only in this realm, where he is “the god of this world” (2 Cor. 4:4). He holds no power over God’s people. The “ancient serpent” is characterized by two things: crafty deceit and implacable opposition to God and his people. The latter is seen in the curse of Gen. 3:15, where continual “hostility” characterizes the relationship between the serpent and all human beings, a hostility demonstrated in the last part, “He will crush your head, and you will crush his heel.” In one sense this portrays the uneven battle between snakes and humans, where the snake has to strike at the heel while the person smashes its head. In another sense it portrays the ongoing battle between good and evil (against 3:15 as the Protevangelium, see Wenham 1987: 81). In the OT the “serpent” is linked to Leviathan, the sea monster of chaos (Job 26:13; Isa. 27:1); but it was not until later Judaism that the serpent was linked to Satan (Wis. 2:24; 3 Bar. 9.7; *b. Sanh.* 29a). In the NT this identification is made complete (2 Cor. 11:3; Rev. 12:9; 20:2).

Second, the dragon is identified as ὁ καλούμενος Διάβολος καὶ ὁ Σατανᾶς (*ho kaloumenos Diabolos kai ho Satanas*, the one called ‘Devil’ and ‘Satan’). In the LXX διάβολος usually translates the Hebrew שָׂטָן (*śātān*), and thus the two Greek terms are virtually synonymous, meaning “adversary” or “evil opponent.” The angel who opposed Balaam (Num. 22:22, 32) was called a שָׂטָן. At its root is a forensic aspect, referring to an accuser in a law court (see on 12:10). This is how “Satan” appears in Job 1:6–12 and 2:1–6, accusing Job “before the Lord,” as well as in Zech. 3:1–2, where Satan accused Joshua the high priest. However, a growing number of scholars see the articular שָׂטָן (*haśśātān*) in Job 1–2 not as a proper name but as a description of an “accusing” or prosecutorial angel. In that sense it would not become a title until the anarthrous form in Zech. 3. In the intertestamental period, Satan is often linked with the evil impulse and tempts people to sin (Jub. 10.8; T. Judah 19.4; 3 Bar. 4.8). He not only accuses people before God (1 Enoch 40.7; Jub. 48.15–16) but tries to destroy them (T. Ben. 3.3; Jub. 1.20 [combining the ideas of accusing and tempting]; 49.2). These ideas continue in the NT, but the language used of Satan is elevated. He is the “prince of this world” (John 12:31; 14:30; 16:11) and the “god of this age” (2 Cor. 4:4), the potentate over unredeemed humanity (Acts 26:18; Col. 1:13) as well as their “father” (John 8:44; 1 John 3:10). He is at heart a liar (John 8:44; 1 John 3:8) and a deceiver (Rev. 20:3, 8, 10) as well as a destroyer (1 Pet. 5:8) and a murderer (John 8:44).

Third, he is ὁ πλανῶν τὴν οἰκουμένην ὅλην (*ho planōn tēn oikoumenēn holēn*, the one who deceives the whole world). Satan and his evil forces are often seen as deceiving both believers

(Jesus in the temptation narrative of Matt. 4:1–11 par.; the saints in Matt. 6:13; 24:24; 2 Cor. 11:3 [Eve]) and unbelievers (Acts 26:18; 2 Cor. 3:12–18; 4:4). His deceptive work is expressed through such pictures as temptation (1 Cor. 7:5; 1 Thess. 3:5), guile (Eph. 6:11), and even disguising himself as an angel of light (2 Cor. 11:14). It is hardly an exaggeration to state that the primary method Satan uses to disrupt the plan of God is deceit (as in Gen. 3). As stated above, in the Bible he is a powerful being only over this world. More than anything, he is portrayed as a deceitful being. Τῶν οἰκουμένην ὅλην in the Apocalypse (3:10; 12:9; 16:14) is another way of saying “the inhabitants of the earth” (so Bauckham 1993b: 239). They are the unredeemed who worship the beast and do his bidding.

To summarize the story in 12:7–9, we are again told that the dragon “was cast to the earth,” but now John adds that “his angels were cast down with him.” Thus the story of the original expulsion of Satan and his angels from heaven is complete. The reader now understands not only how the evil angels fell but why they fell and what kind of beings Satan and his messengers are.

(2) Heavenly Hymn Celebrating Victory (12:10–12)

Throughout this book, the hymns have functioned like a Greek chorus in a play, not only celebrating but also interpreting the significance of the narratives. Thus, the hymn here interprets the significance of 12:7–9 for the people of God. There are three parts (see du Rand 1993b: 320–22): the celebration of God’s deliverance in casting down the dragon (v. 10), the expansion of that victory to include the conquering of Satan by the saints (v. 11), and the implications of the victory for heaven and earth (v. 12).

The “loud voice in heaven” (12:10) parallels the “loud voices” of 11:15 and probably comes from the heavenly court surrounding the throne of God (the twenty-four elders are in 11:16; cf. also 4:10; 5:8; 19:4).^[4] The voice celebrates the arrival of the messianic kingdom of God and Christ. In Revelation ἡ^[5] σωτηρία (*hē sōtēria*, salvation) occurs three times (7:10; 12:10; 19:1) and follows its OT thrust of “deliverance” or “victory” (see discussion at 7:10). God has defeated the dragon and delivered his people. Aune (1998a: 700) states, “While σωτηρία certainly centers on the notion of ‘salvation’ in the sense of the ‘deliverance, rescue’ of the people of God . . . the context of the heavenly battle between Michael and the dragon and the use of military imagery in verse 11 suggest that ‘victory’ is a particularly apt translation.” In this context all three bindings of Satan are intertwined; it is not just the victory won by Christ on the cross but the final victory also celebrated in 11:15–19. The ἄρτι (*arti*, now) stresses that the victory has “now” been accomplished. Ἡ δύναμις (*hē dynamis*, power) is another frequent appellation used in the hymns (4:11; 5:12; 7:12; 11:17; 19:1) and refers to the “power” used by God in defeating the dragon and his forces. As stated above, the dragon possesses only an earthly “power” (13:2; 17:13; 18:3) that is shown to be impotent when the eschaton arrives (15:8; 19:11–16; 20:7–10). Ἡ βασιλεία τοῦ θεοῦ ἡμῶν (*hē basileia tou theou hēmōn*, the kingdom of our God) is the gift of Christ to his followers (1:6, 9; 5:10) and speaks of the royalty they will share with him (20:4). It is the final “kingdom” of God that will replace “the kingdom of this world” (11:15), the eternal reality of the “new heavens and the new earth” (21:1–2).^[6] Finally, ἡ ἐξουσία τοῦ Χριστοῦ αὐτοῦ (*hē exousia tou Christou autou*, the authority of his Messiah)^[7] refers to the “authority” Christ received over the nations from the Father (2:27b; cf. Matt. 28:18; John 5:27; 17:2) and again in contrast to the earthly “authority” of the evil kingdom of the beast (13:2, 4, 5, 7, 12) as well as the “authority” of those demonic powers that tortured the earth-dwellers (6:8; 9:3, 10, 19). Behind this once again is Dan. 7:14, which says that the “one like a son of man” was “given authority, glory, and sovereign power. . . . His dominion is an

everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed.” This “authority” has also been passed on to the faithful saints and witnesses (2:27a; 11:6).

The reason (ὅτι, *hoti*, because) for this rejoicing is that the ὁ κατήγωρ (*ho katēgōr*, the accuser) has been “thrown down” from heaven. This final description of the dragon builds on the meaning of his name, “Satan” (see above), the adversary or “accuser” of “our brothers and sisters” (NLT). This aspect of Satan’s opposition is further intensified by the use of the cognate verb in the added “who accuses them before our God day and night.” This is a legal term, pointing to a prosecutor in a court of law.^[8] “Satan” first prosecutes Job in Job 1:6–12 and 2:1–6 (accusing him of serving God for his own self-interests) and Joshua the high priest in Zech. 3:1–2 (probably accusing him of the sins of the nation). R. Charles (1920: 1.327) points out that in later Judaism Michael and Satan were often portrayed as legal opponents, with Michael the advocate for righteous Israel (T. Levi 5.6; T. Dan 6.2, 3). First Enoch 40.7 speaks of “demons . . . coming before the Lord of the Spirits in order to accuse them that dwell on the earth,” and Jub. 17.15–18.13 describes Satan’s (called “Prince Mastema”) role in the Aqedah: he accuses Abraham of loving Isaac his son more than God. Beale (1999: 662) believes that Rev. 12:10, 12 exhibit a “latter-day exodus pattern” because of the threefold pattern of Michael’s overcoming the dragon’s accusations, the casting of the devil into the sea, and praise for God’s kingdom, since all three are also present in late Jewish speculations on the exodus. In Jub. 48.9–19 “Prince Mastema” was “bound and shut up . . . so that he might not accuse” the children of Israel; in Exod. Rab. 18.5 Michael’s defeat of Satan in the heavenly court allows the exodus to take place; and in *Pesiḳta Rabbati* 46 Michael stood at the right hand of God interceding for Israel against Egypt. Finally, in *Mekilta de Rabbi Ishmael*, tractate *Shirata* 2.115–19, the evil angel aiding Egypt is thrown into the sea, resulting in Israel’s praise. It is difficult to say whether there is an actual exodus motif in these verses, but the parallels make such a real possibility. The main point is that in 12:7–10 victory in war becomes also victory in God’s legal courtroom. The two metaphors are closely intertwined. As Paul says in Rom. 8:33, “Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies.” Satan can no longer prosecute the people of God, for he has lost his place in heaven.

Those who are accused ἐνίκησαν (*enikēsan*, conquered) the dragon (12:11). The victory of Satan over believers is both earthly and temporary (cf. 13:7), while their victory over him is final and eternal. The connecting καί (*kai*, and) seems to make this a second part of the ὅτι clause in 12:10b. In other words, the rejoicing of the heavenly voices in 12:10a is caused by the casting down of the accuser and by the victory of the saints over him. In 11:7 and 13:7 the beast temporarily “conquers” the people of God in battle (in both places he “goes to war” against them), and in 17:14 the kings of the earth “go to war” against the Lamb and his “faithful followers.” But here and in 17:14 the beast and his followers are instead “conquered” by those against whom they fight. In 15:2 these “victors” stand before the throne with harps and sing the Song of Moses. All this builds on the “overcomer”/“conqueror” sayings in the letters to the seven churches (2:7, 11, 17, 26; 3:5, 12, 21) that promised eschatological rewards to the faithful in the churches who persevered and “conquered” the forces arrayed against them. The two metaphors of “victory” in a courtroom battle (1 Enoch 50.2; 2 Esdr. [4 Ezra] 7:115) and a military war (2 Esdr. [4 Ezra] 7:127; 1QM 4.13) that are found in Rev. 12:7–10 are closely connected in the “conquering” theme as well.

This victory is achieved by the saints in two ways: First, they “overcome” Satan διὰ τὸ αἷμα τοῦ ἀρνίου (*dia to haima tou arniou*, on account of the blood of the Lamb). The real basis for all spiritual victory is always the cross rather than one’s own strength. Barr (1997: 361) states that evil is conquered not by superior power but by the blood of the Lamb (5:6; 12:11). Thus, John

demythologizes the holy war and remythologizes it via the warrior as a suffering servant. We have already been told in 5:6 that the conquering Ram was actually the slain Lamb, whose blood “purchased people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation” and made them “a kingdom and priests” (5:9–10; cf. also 1:5–6). Indeed, the saints have been “made white in the blood of the Lamb” (7:14). In other words, the basic message of the Apocalypse is that Satan has already been defeated at the cross, and the victory of the saints is assured. As 12:12 will tell us, he already knows he has lost. The blood of the saints will be vindicated (6:10), and indeed the earth-dwellers will drink blood “because they shed the blood of your saints and prophets” (16:5–6). Because the great prostitute was “drunk with the blood of the saints” (17:6), her doom was certain (18:24; cf. 18:21–24; 19:2, 13). It is the blood of Christ that is the basis of every victory achieved by the people of God.

The second basis for the saints’ victory over the dragon is διὰ τὸν λόγον τῆς μαρτυρίας[9] αὐτῶν[10] (*dia ton logon tēs martyrias autōn*, on account of the word of their testimony). In 1:2, 9 it is “the testimony of Jesus” that becomes the basis for the “testimony” of the saints for him. As Christ was “the faithful and true witness” (3:14; cf. 1:5; John 18:37), so the believer is called to be a faithful witness (19:10). The martyrdom of the saints is due to their “testimony” (6:9; 12:17; 20:4), as exemplified in the two witnesses of 11:3–7. The “witness” of the believers is first a lifestyle of faithfulness to Christ and second a verbal witness during the period of their suffering. It is clear that the church at this final period of terrible persecution does not go into hiding so as to avoid the wrath of the beast but maintains its evangelistic efforts to the very end. Thus, John goes on to clarify this “witness” with the attitude behind it: οὐκ ἠγάπησαν τὴν ψυχὴν αὐτῶν ἄχρι θανάτου (*ouk ēgapēsan tēn psychēn autōn achri thanatou*, they did not love their lives to the point of death). They refused to live for themselves and to behave in such a way as to avoid persecution. Jesus’ teaching on discipleship made clear that the true follower was to place him above everything: “If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters—yes, even his own life—he cannot be my disciple” (Luke 14:26). Christ is to be such a priority that the deepest human affections—love for family and for one’s own self—are to be virtual “hate” in comparison. Also, Jesus said, “If anyone would come after me, they must deny themselves, take up their cross, and follow me” (Mark 8:34). Crossbearing is the essential component of *imitatio Christi* (the “imitation of Christ”), a willingness to die for Christ. In Mark 8:35 Jesus explains crossbearing in terms reminiscent of the “love of life” issue here: “For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and the gospel will save it.” Thus, here the true followers refused to love their lives ἄχρι θανάτου, which could have a temporal force (“until the time of death”) or stress degree (“to the point of death”). The latter is more likely in this context, which stresses the fact of suffering more than the time of suffering. In other words, this says that the faithful believers maintained their witness even when it meant martyrdom (see 6:9; 11:7; 12:17; 20:4). This is the second time ἄχρι θανάτου appears in this book. In 2:10 the believers in Smyrna were told: “The devil is about to throw some of you into prison to be tested, and you will experience affliction for ten days. Be faithful to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life.” It is clear in both passages that all will not be martyred. Many have said that all the believers in the Apocalypse were to become martyrs. On the basis of 2:10 and 12:11, that is not so. All will be persecuted, but not all will die. They must be willing to die if necessary, and many will be killed but not all.

The third part of this hymn (12:12) relates the results for heaven and for earth. Διὰ τοῦτο (*dia touto*, on account of this) refers to the whole of 12:10–11, not just to verse 11 itself. Because of the

coming of the kingdom, which involves both the overthrow of Satan and the victory of the faithful, the heaven-dwellers are called upon to rejoice and the earth-dwellers to mourn. In the OT heaven and earth are normally called on to rejoice together (Ps. 96:11; Isa. 44:23; 49:13). Since the “earth” has come under the control of evil powers, however, it must suffer the consequences.

Εὐφραίνεσθε (*euphrainesthe*, rejoice) was used in 11:10 of the earth-dwellers’ “joy” at the death of the two witnesses. There is often a religious tone to the term, with implications of worship (in 11:10 they exchange gifts, reflecting the Festival of Purim), and that is certainly the case here, as all of heaven is called to celebrate with joy over the great victory of Christ and the saints (see also 18:20). Both “heaven” and those who “dwell” in it are named. These are not separate entities, and the **καί** (*kai*, and) is probably epexegetical, “heaven, namely those who dwell in it.” While some think these are angelic beings (Morris, Mounce, Thomas), it is more likely that all heavenly beings, including the saints (6:9–11), are intended.

Bauckham (1993b: 240) rightly sees a contrast between “the heavens and those who dwell in it” here and “the earth and those who dwell in it” in 13:12. The earth-dwellers are those who worship the beast, while the heaven-dwellers are those who worship God and Christ. This parallels the contrast between heaven and earth/sea in chapter 13, and this contrast is further heightened by the verb that always characterizes the earth-dwellers, **κατοικοῦντες** (*katoikountes*, those who inhabit) and the verb for the heaven-dwellers, **σκηνοῦντες** (*skēnountes*, those who tabernacle), a contrast repeated in 13:6, 8. This verb was used in 7:15 of the enthroned God “spreading his tent” over the victorious saints in heaven, indicating his eternal protection over them and fellowship with them. This builds on that image and pictures the redeemed as having a permanent home in heaven. They belong to heaven, while the unbelievers belong to earth. Michaelis (*TDNT* 7:377–78) shows how the **σκήνη** word group in Revelation consistently evokes the tabernacle-in-heaven imagery (see 21:3), and the thrust here is that the believers will “tabernacle” permanently with God in heaven.

While the heavens rejoice, the “earth and the sea” are called on to mourn. In this verse the three primary regions of the Apocalypse are found: heaven, earth, and sea. The last two, however, refer to the same entity, the realm of evil. The two beasts of chapter 13 emerge from the sea and the earth respectively. In the laments of chapter 18, the grief of the “kings of the earth” (18:9–10), the “merchants of the earth” (18:11–12), and the “captains of the sea” (18:17b–18) are again contrasted to the rejoicing of the heavens (18:20). Here the call to mourn utilizes the same term (**οὐαί**, *ouai*, woe) that initiated the three “woes” of the trumpet judgments (8:13; 9:12; 11:14). As there, the “woe” builds on the judgment oracles of the OT and depicts the effects of the wrath of God on those who have rebelled against him.^[11] In the only other occurrence of the term in the book, double “woes” introduce the laments of the kings, merchants, and sea captains in 18:10, 16, 19 at the fall of Babylon the Great. There and here the other aspect of the “woe” is seen, the mourning of those who have felt the wrath of God.^[12] While the primary thrust in 12:12b is the devil’s “wrath” against the unbelievers on earth, Beale (1999: 667) correctly points out that John does not have just unbelievers in mind but all who are still on the earth, the saints and the unsaved. In 12:13–17 his attack on the saints is part of his “wrath” against all on earth.

The reason for the mourning is that **κατέβη ὁ διάβολος πρὸς ὑμᾶς** (*katebē ho diabolos pros hymas*, the devil has gone down to you). In 12:9–10 the devil is “cast down” by God, but here the devil again takes the initiative and “goes down” to the earth; this is similar to 12:4, where Satan cast down a third of the angelic host to earth. In 11:7 the beast “ascends” (**ἀναβαίνω**, *anabainō*, comes up) from the abyss, while here the devil “descends” (**καταβαίνω**, *katabainō*, goes down) to the earth.

Moreover, his anger and hostility are foremost. He has gone down ἔχων θυμὸν μέγαν (*echōn thymon megan*, having great wrath). Interestingly, this is the only place the devil is characterized as having θυμός (in one place, the nations have ὀργή, *orgē*, anger, 11:18, but Satan never has it). Everywhere else, it is God who has “anger” and “wrath.” However, Satan’s “wrath” is not righteous indignation but the fury and frustration resulting from the final defeat of his evil plans. It is clear that he will take out his hostility on the inhabitants of earth, his actual followers. This has already happened in the book, in the fifth and sixth trumpets (9:1–19), when the demonic locusts torture the earth-dwellers for five months, and then the demonic horsemen kill one-third of their worshipers (9:19–20).

There are two reasons for the devil’s wrath: First, he has lost his place in heaven (12:7–9, 10b), and second, this means ὀλίγον καιρὸν ἔχει (*oligon kairon echei*, he has a short time) left. His final defeat is imminent. Satan knows that he cannot win and that it is only a “short time” before he is cast into the lake of fire (20:10). This same sense of imminence characterizes the parousia expectation of the NT (Matt. 16:27; 1 Cor. 1:7; Rev. 22:7, 12, 20), even though Jesus said that only the Father “knows about the day or the hour” (Matt. 24:36). While believers are characterized by good works in their time on earth, Satan wants to do as many evil works as he can in his short time left. His judgment is both inevitable and imminent, so the world must brace itself for the outpouring of evil from Satan and his demonic hordes. Why does Satan hate his own followers, the earth-dwellers? Unbelievers are still made in the image of God, and they are still the objects of God’s love (John 3:16). So they are the objects of Satan’s wrath. It is clear in the Gospels that demon possession has only one goal—to torture and kill all who are made in the image of God (see Mark 5:1–20 and 9:14–29).

Summary and Contextualization

The war in heaven between God and Satan is described in 12:7–9, and it refers primarily to the primordial expulsion of Satan from heaven but also to his defeat at the death and resurrection of Jesus. Michael, the captain of the Lord’s host, goes to war against the dragon and prevails. It is clear that Satan is only “the god of this world” (2 Cor. 4:4) and has no power in the heavenly sphere. Moreover, in Rev. 12:9 we learn the true essence of the dragon. He is the “ancient serpent” of the Garden, the great “adversary” or Satan, the accuser of the believers (also 12:10) who works through deceit rather than power. His defeat is celebrated in the incredible hymn of 12:10–12, where the saints share the victory over Satan on two grounds: first by “the blood of the Lamb,” that great cosmic victory that spelled the final defeat of the dragon, and second by their own faithful testimony and martyrdom. Throughout this book, it is clear that when Satan kills one of God’s people (cf. 6:9–11; 11:7–8), this spells out another defeat for him. As a result of his numerous defeats (at the fall, at the birth as well as the death and resurrection of Jesus, in the faithful lives and deaths of the saints), the heavens rejoice but the earth mourns. Satan knows that the time he has left to oppose God and his people is short indeed, so he is filled with wrath. This provides an entirely new perspective on persecution. Not only is suffering a special “fellowship” with Christ (Phil. 3:10; Col. 1:24); it is also a defeat of Satan in the spiritual war. As the saints persevere in facing opposition, that is great victory over Satan, and their willingness to give up their lives for Christ is the greatest victory of all. Once more, whenever Satan takes the life of one of the faithful, he participates in his own defeat, as occurred when he took control of Judas and led Christ to the cross, the greatest military defeat in history.

Additional Notes

12:7. One problem of the view that Satan was expelled from heaven in the primordial past is the passages that show him having access to heaven. In Job 1:6–7 and 2:1–2 the “accusing” angel (see on 12:10 above) apparently has access to heaven and accuses Job, and in Zech. 3:1–2 Satan likewise accuses Joshua the high priest before God. This scenario continues in Rev. 12:10, where Satan still “accuses” the saints “before our God day and night.” In light of the tradition of a primordial fall, however, Satan would be coming not as an occupant of heaven but as a permitted guest. The earth has become his prison (cf. 2 Pet. 2:4; Jude 6), and so Satan is allowed to appear only by divine permission. In other words, he has no home in heaven but is allowed by God to come before him in order to accuse believers. This fits the thesis here that Satan was cast out of heaven at the dawn of history but in Job (perhaps), Zechariah, and Revelation is still given access to heaven so he can accuse the saints before God.

12:10. While the more common Greek word κατήγορος (*katēgoros*, accuser) is found in the majority of manuscripts (□⁷ C P 046 etc.), and κατήγωρ appears only in A, most text critics accept it because it is the more difficult reading. Later scribes would have been more likely to change the rare κατήγωρ to the more usual form than vice versa.

iii. War on Earth (12:13–17)

The pursuit of the people of God by the enraged dragon in 12:7, 12 is expanded in 12:13–17. First, we see the dragon pursuing/persecuting the woman/people of God (12:13), then she is protected by God in the “place prepared for her” (12:14), where temptations and persecution are hurled at her like a great flood (12:15), but God’s creation comes to her aid and rescues her (12:16). This enrages the dragon further, and he leaves to make war on her offspring, those who had been converted by the people of God (12:17). This prepares for chapter 13, which will describe how the dragon conducts his war.

- (1) Pursuit of the dragon (12:13)
- (2) Care and protection of the woman (12:14–16)
- (3) Rage and pursuit by the dragon (12:17)

Exegesis and Exposition

¹³Now when the dragon saw that he was thrown to the earth, he pursued the woman who had borne the male child. ¹⁴And God gave the woman the two wings of the great eagle so that she might fly to the desert to her place, where she would be nourished for a time, times, and half a time away from the presence of the serpent. ¹⁵Then the serpent spewed from his mouth a flood of water, so that he might sweep her away. ¹⁶But the earth came to her rescue. It opened its mouth and swallowed the flood that the dragon had spewed out of its mouth. ¹⁷So the dragon was enraged at the woman and went out to make war against the rest of her offspring who obey the commandments of God and hold to their testimony for Jesus.

(1) Pursuit of the Dragon (12:13)

Now the wrath of the devil (12:12b) is turned specifically against the saints. While 12:7–9 was an expansion of 12:4, this is an expansion of 12:6, detailing the action of the “dragon” (the return to this title for Satan is intended to draw the reader back to the basic story of 12:1–6) that forced the woman to flee into the desert. Also, the article in τὸν ἄρσενά (ton arsená, the male child) is anaphoric, pointing back to the “male child” in 12:5. It is the “pursuit” of the dragon that makes the woman “flee.” It is interesting that the dragon “saw” or realized that he had been cast down to earth. This hints that the expulsion was the instantaneous act of a vastly superior force (God and Michael in 12:9). One minute Satan was in heaven fighting against Michael, the next minute he found himself on earth. At that point, he turned his anger against the woman and ἐδίωξεν (*edōxen*, pursued) her. There is a double meaning in this verb, as the dragon both “pursued” and “persecuted” her (so Swete 1911: 157). The picture of the woman fleeing before the pursuing dragon is another exodus motif, built on Israel fleeing before the pursuing chariots of Pharaoh (called the dragon “Rahab” in Isa. 51:9–10; cf. Ps. 74:13–14).

(2) Care and Protection of the Woman (12:14–16)

In 12:6 the woman “flees into the desert to a place prepared for her by God.” Here we are told how she flees. God “gives” (another divine passive ἐδόθησαν [*edothēsan*, was given];^[1] cf. Rev. 6:2, 4, 8, 11, etc.) her αἱ δύο πτέρυγες τοῦ ἀετοῦ τοῦ μεγάλου (*hai dyo pteryges tou aetou tou megalou*, the two wings of the great eagle). While the articles could be generic, simply using a metaphor (so Mounce 1998: 241 n. 2), it is more likely that they point back to the OT examples of eagles as

divinely sent deliverers (so Beale 1999: 669). The imagery is incredible, for she is not just borne away by an eagle but is actually given the wings of an eagle to fly away herself. There is further exodus typology here, alluding to Exod. 19:4 (“I took you up on eagle’s wings and brought you to myself”) and Deut. 32:10–11 (“In a desert land he found him . . . like an eagle that stirs up its nest and hovers over its young, that spreads its wings to catch them and carries them in its pinions”). This picture of rescue by an eagle became a standard motif in Jewish thought (cf. 1 Enoch 96.2; T. Moses 10.8). The closest parallel is Isa. 40:31, where Israel is told that the faithful “will soar on wings like eagles,” that is, they will rise above their earthly trials through the new strength that God supplies.

In a further recapitulation of 12:6, the wings allow her to “fly” (in 12:6 she “flees”) to [\[2\]](#) “her place in the desert” (v. 6 adds “prepared by God”). There she **τρέφεται** (*trepheṭai*, is nourished—the same verb as in 12:6) by God (another divine passive). The desert is often seen in the OT as a place of refuge and of God’s provision (see discussion at 12:6). There it is also said she would be nourished for “1,260 days” (also found in 11:3; “forty-two months” is found in 11:2; 13:5). In a variation, she is here looked after for “time, times, and half a time,” another way of saying three and a half years (with the plural “times” referring to two years). This is the only place this phrase occurs in the Apocalypse, and it is a direct allusion to Dan. 7:25 and 12:7, where it also refers to the last days when the saints will be “handed over” to the little horn, who will “oppress” them (7:25). This is the flip side of that emphasis: they will be oppressed through physical persecution but will be nourished spiritually by God (see the discussion of 3:10; 6:9–11; 7:3–4, 14–17; 10:9–10; 11:1–2; 12:6). Indeed, they will not only be nourished but protected **ἀπὸ προσώπου τοῦ ὄφεως** (*apo prosōpou tou opheōs*, “from the face of the serpent”), a phrase that means “from the presence of the serpent.” [\[3\]](#) By using “serpent” here, it may mean she will be protected from the deceptive wiles of the devil, similar to the Lord’s Prayer, “and lead us not into [which means ‘give us strength to overcome’] temptation, but deliver us from the evil one” (Matt. 6:13). Satan will be able to kill them but will not be able to defeat them.

In 12:15 a specific example of her protection from the deceptive powers of the serpent follows the thesis in 12:14. The OT connection between the serpent and Leviathan (see above on 12:7–9) is behind this, as the serpent opened its mouth and **ἔβαλεν . . . ὕδωρ ὡς ποταμόν** (*ebalen . . . hydōr hōs potamon*, threw water like a river), which means to “send a flood.” His purpose was to **ποταμολόρητον** (*potamorphorēton*, sweep her away in a torrent, drown her). This is certainly a flood of lies and deceit as well as persecution in this context. Preterists see here an allusion to the flood of the Jordan River in A.D. 68 that kept the Jewish people from fleeing the Roman army and led to their wholesale slaughter (see Josephus, *J.W.* 4.7.5 §§433–36). But a metaphorical understanding is more in keeping with the style of this book. Satan’s use of lies and deceit is described in Matt. 24:24 (false signs and wonders that might deceive “even the elect if possible”; cf. Mark 13:6); Luke 22:31 (“Satan has asked to sift you as wheat”); 2 Thess. 2:9–10 (“counterfeit miracles”); and Rev. 13:13–15; 16:14 (the miraculous signs of the false prophet). There could be an allusion to the false teachers in the seven churches (2:2, 14–15, 20–23). The image of a flood to describe persecution is found in Ps. 18:4 (“the torrents of destruction”); 32:6 (“when the mighty waters rise”); 69:2 (“the floods engulf me”; also 124:4); and Isa. 43:2 (“when you pass through the waters”).

As Satan tries to drown the woman, another miracle occurs in 12:16 as **ἐβοήθησεν** (*eboēthēsen*, she is rescued), probably another divine passive meaning “God rescues her.” He causes the “earth” to “open its mouth and swallow the flood.” Minear (1991: 74–75) sees here another reflection of Gen. 3–4, stating the the flood spewed by Satan refers to the curse of Cain, whose murder of his

brother was the primary example of the enmity caused by the serpent. As the earth drank the blood of Abel, so here it drinks the flood sent by the serpent. Thus, this is a reversal: the first led to the contamination of the earth, this leads to the protection of the woman. Dochhorn (1997) believes that the persecution of the saints here reenacts the persecution of the Hebrews by Pharaoh. This verse points to the Korah incident in Num. 16:30, 32; Deut. 11:16, where the same terms are used—“open,” “mouth,” “swallow.” In Num. 16:32 the “earth opened its mouth and swallowed” the sons of Korah in divine judgment for their rebellion. Celebrating this, Ps. 106:17 says, “The earth opened up and swallowed Dathan; it buried the company of Abiram” (cf. Deut. 11:6). Also, in the Song of Moses the drowning of the Egyptians is described as, “You stretched out your right hand and the earth swallowed them” (Exod. 15:12). Thus, Dochhorn sees an exodus motif here. Throughout the OT, this image speaks both of divine judgment and God protecting his people from those who would lead them astray (the sons of Korah) or destroy them (the Egyptians). In Revelation the flood waters or the sea figuratively depict the powers of evil. So here the earth is the tool of God once more in delivering his people from the deceptive wiles of the devil (cf. 1 Cor. 10:13; Eph. 6:10–12) and Satan’s attempt to devour them (1 Pet. 5:8–9).

(3) Rage and Pursuit by the Dragon (12:17)

Once more (see 12:12) the devil ὀργίσθη (*ōrgisthē*, was enraged), but this time his rage is focused specifically ἐπὶ ^[4] τῇ γυναικί (*epi tē gynaikei*, at the woman). In 12:12 the “devil” had θυμός (*thymos*, wrath) toward the people of earth. Now the “dragon” (the term from 12:3) has ὀργή specifically against the woman/people of God. In this context the two terms are most likely synonymous; Louw and Nida (1988: 1:762) say that when they occur in the same context, “the meaning of one simply heightens the intensity or significance of the other.” Thus, here the two refer to intense, passionate anger. This anger causes the dragon “to make war against the rest of her offspring.”

There are three defeats of the dragon in chapter 12: (1) In 12:5 the dragon is frustrated when God snatches the baby Jesus from his grasp. (2) In 12:7 the dragon and his host of fallen angels “went to war” against Michael and his angels and “lost their place in heaven” (12:8). (3) In 12:15–16 his attempt to destroy the woman is also frustrated. Therefore, his rage in 12:12, 17 is based on these defeats. So now he wages war against “her offspring.” There is a difference of opinion as to the meaning of this war. Some dispensationalists (Walvoord 1966: 196) believe that the woman is Israel as a whole, and the “offspring” is the believing remnant among them; while others (Thomas 1995: 142) say the woman is believing Israel and the remnant the 144,000 sealed in chapter 7. This is based on the view that the saints in this book are Jewish converts who are converted after the rapture, a position I do not hold (see the discussion of 7:4; 12:1–2). Others (P. Hughes 1990: 142–43; Glasson 1965: 78) have said the contrast is between the Palestinian church (the woman) and the Gentile church (the offspring), but there is no basis for that in the book (see Krodel 1989: 246). Still others (Mounce, Michaels, Johnson) believe the contrast is between the male seed, Christ (12:5, 13), and the church (12:13–17). Finally, some (Swete, Ladd, Caird, Krodel, Beale) see a contrast between the woman as the “ideal church” from a heavenly perspective (12:6, 13–16) and the “offspring” as the earthly church seen as a whole (12:17). In favor of this would be the depiction of the woman in 12:1–2 as “in heaven” and the idea of mother Zion bearing her children in Isa. 66:7–8. These last two options are not antithetical and together provide the solution. The “rest of her offspring” is the church down through the ages as well as in this final three-and-a-half-year period of history. As Michaels (1997: 153 note on 12:17) and Aune (1998a: 708) note, σπέρμα (normally used of the male line) is found only here in the book and alludes to Gen. 3:15, where God curses the serpent: “I will

put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel.” The early church saw this fulfilled in themselves, as in Rom. 16:20, “The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet.”

Those in the church who are the object of the dragon’s wrath become victors when they τηρούντων τὰς ἐντολὰς τοῦ θεοῦ καὶ ἔχόντων τὴν μαρτυρίαν Ἰησοῦ (*tērountōn tas entolas tou theou kai echontōn tēn martyrian Iēsou*, keep the commandments of God and hold to the testimony of Jesus). The present tense participles stress the ongoing perseverance of the church in obeying God and maintaining their testimony for Jesus (see the section on “Theology” in the introduction). As in 1:9 Ἰησοῦ may well be a general genitive, depicting the church’s testimony about Jesus as based on Jesus’ testimony for God. In other words, the church’s faithfulness is made possible by and modeled after Jesus’ faithfulness. On the basis of 12:11, however, their testimony about Jesus has primacy here, as in the parallel 6:9; 19:10; 20:4. Indeed, these two aspects, obedience and faithful witness, are the two keys to the church’s victory both through the ages and in this final period of the cosmic war. The phrase “keeping God’s commandments” occurs again in 14:12, where it is linked to “remaining faithful to Jesus.” There the two define “patient endurance” and tell how the believer avoids the same terrible end as the followers of the beast (14:9–11). It is also this obedience and faithfulness that provide the key solution in the letters to the churches (2:10, 25–26; 3:3, 10–11). Aune (1998a: 709–12) argues that “the commandments of God” alludes specifically to the second table of the Decalogue centering on the ethical requirements for the people of God. Jesus told the rich young ruler to “keep the commandments” (Matt. 19:17; cf. also John 14:15, 21; 15:10; 1 John 2:3–4; 3:22, 24; 5:2–3). While the actual thrust of the phrase is to all the commandments in the Word, it still sums up the ethical responsibilities of the believer in following God to the very end.

Summary and Contextualization

The wrath of the dragon (12:12) is further spelled out in the war on earth (12:13–17). The dragon tries to drown the saints with a torrent of lies and persecution, but God causes the earth to open and frustrate Satan’s evil plans. Once more, God keeps the saints secure and rescues them from the “deceptive schemes” (Eph. 6:11) of the devil. He gives believers “a way out so that [they] can stand up under” these temptations and trials (1 Cor. 10:13). As elsewhere, this passage applies specifically to the saints of the final period under the wrathful hand of the beast but also to those in John’s day and ours. Satan is enraged and at war with all the “offspring,” those who find Christ through the faithful witness of the church. The Christian life is not meant to be a peaceful life with nothing but earthly prosperity (contra to some false teachers of our day). On the contrary, all who find Christ also face the wrath of Satan. Still, we find victory when we live in obedience to God’s commands (found in his Word) and maintain our faithful witness to Christ.

iv. Two Beasts Wage War (12:18–13:18)

Chapter 13 provides the final expansion of the original vision-story in 12:1–6, in that sense expanding on the reason why the woman had to flee to the desert. But in reality the chapter expands on 12:17 (12:13–17 expanded 12:6) and the “rage” of the dragon that led it to “make war” with the “offspring” of the woman. It tells how the dragon waged that war and describes the two satanic agents that carry out that war, the beast from the sea and the beast from the earth. Still, the key theme of this chapter is the sovereignty of God. Everything the two beasts do occurs only because God allows them to do so (13:5–8, 14–15), and the saints submit mainly because God tells them to do so (13:9–10). Also, the great works of the beasts are mere counterfeits of what Christ and his servants have already done (13:3, 14), and they astound the earth-dwellers with the same “deception” that characterizes their master, the dragon (12:9). Still, they are able to convince the unsaved world to worship them (vv. 4, 8, 12, 15), so idolatry remains a major problem in the book (2:14, 20; 9:20–21; 21:8; 22:15). Lee (1998: 174–75, 190–92) develops a chiastic structure of ten parallel sections in the book, with chapters 13–14 as the center of the work. He believes it describes “the moment of decision” to follow the beast or the Lamb.

(1) The Beast from the Sea—the Antichrist (12:18–13:10)

Satan’s attack against the woman and her offspring centers on the beast who emerges from the sea (a symbol of evil in the book), and it is clear that the beast takes on the image of the dragon himself (with ten horns and seven heads, 12:3 = 13:1) and has the same “authority” as the dragon (13:2). As such the beast is the “son” of the dragon, a further parody on Christ, and this imitation motif continues in the “mortal wound” that “is healed” (13:3–4), a parody on the death and resurrection of Christ. It seems obvious that the beast builds on the Antichrist theme of the NT (see below). As such, he conducts the final war against God and his people (13:5–8) as well as demanding universal worship (13:4, 8), probably alluding to the imperial cult demanding worship of the emperor.

- (a) The dragon empowers his agent, the beast (12:18–13:4)
 - (i) Emergence of the beast from the sea (12:18–13:2b)
 - (ii) Authority of the beast (13:2c) Excursus: The Antichrist
 - (iii) Fatal wound healed (13:3a)
 - (iv) Universal worship of the dragon and beast (13:3b–4)
- (b) God’s control over the beast’s activities (13:5–8)
 - (i) God allows blasphemy and slander (13:5–6)
 - (ii) God allows the beast to conquer the saints (13:7a)
 - (iii) God allows the beast to receive universal worship (13:7b–8)
- (c) Parenthesis: significance for believers (13:9–10)

Exegesis and Exposition

^{12:18}Now the dragon stood on the shore of the sea. ^{13:1}And I saw a beast ascending from the sea, having ten horns and seven heads. On his horns there were ten diadems, and on his heads there was τ a name τ of blasphemy. ²And the beast that I saw was like a leopard, and he had feet like a bear and a mouth like the mouth of a lion. And the dragon gave him his power and his throne and great authority. ³One of his heads appeared to be slain unto death, but its mortal wound was healed. The whole world τ was amazed τ (and followed) after the beast, ⁴and they worshiped the dragon that had given authority to the beast, and they worshiped the beast, saying, “Who is like the beast, and who is able to make war against him?”

⁵God gave it a mouth to speak great blasphemies, and he allowed it to exercise authority for forty-two months. ⁶The beast opened his mouth in order to blaspheme God and to slander his name and his tabernacle, τ namely, those who inhabit heaven τ . ⁷And God gave him power to wage war against the saints and to conquer them, and he gave him authority over every tribe, people, language, and nation. ⁸All who inhabit the earth will worship him, namely, τ those whose name has not been written τ in the book of life belonging to the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world.

⁹If anyone has an ear, let them hear:

¹⁰If anyone (is destined) τ for captivity τ ,
to captivity they must go.

If anyone (is destined) τ to be killed τ by the sword,
by the sword (they must) be killed.

This demands endurance and faithfulness on the part of the saints.

(a) The Dragon Empowers His Agent, the Beast (12:18–13:4)

(i) Emergence of the Beast from the Sea (12:18–13:2b)

From an early date, 12:18 was taken as the introduction to chapter 13 rather than the conclusion to

chapter 12. This is seen in the manuscripts that have καὶ ἐστάθην (*kai estathēn*, and I stood: P 046 051 1 94 et al.) in order to agree with the following “I saw” in 13:1 (meaning that John himself “stood at the seashore and saw”), rather than the much better supported καὶ ἐστάθη (*kai estathē*, and he stood: $\square^{47}$ C 1828 et al.). In other words, early tradition saw 12:18 with 13:1. The dragon is presupposed with the third singular “he,” so all of chapter 13 is seen as a result of the “wrath” of the dragon in 12:17. Most certainly John wrote this to serve as a transition from chapter 12 to chapter 13.^[1] Καὶ ἐστάθη is the third verb of 12:17–18 (“The dragon was enraged . . . and went . . . and stood”) and so belongs with chapter 12. Yet the subject matter introduces chapter 13, with the dragon standing at the seashore and awaiting the emergence of the first beast. The reason he stands “on the shore [lit., the ‘sand’] of the sea” is to call forth his agent for the final battle. One must remember that the dragon himself as Leviathan (see on 12:3) was the sea monster from the deep, and the “sea” throughout the Apocalypse symbolizes the realm of evil. This is a very dramatic scene, for as the dragon stands on the shore, the beast arises slowly from the sea. The first part (13:1–2a) pictures the beast appearing one part at a time as it arises: first the horns, then the heads with the crowns, and finally the body with its resemblance to the animal kingdom.

The characteristic καὶ εἶδον (*kai eidon*, and I saw) in 13:1 leads into the appearance of the first beast (another will lead into the appearance of the second in 13:11). As elsewhere (e.g., 6:1, 2, 5, 8, 12), it points to another section but not a major division. In 11:7 the beast “ascends from the abyss,” but here it “ascends from the sea.” As stated in 9:1, however, the “abyss” refers to the unfathomable depths of the sea, so these two images are synonymous. This verse alludes to Dan. 7:3 LXX, where the four beasts of Daniel’s dream also ἀνέβαινον ἐκ τῆς θαλάσσης (*anebainon ek tēs thalassēs*, ascended from the sea). Therefore, like the dragon of chapter 12, the θηρίον (*thērion*, beast)^[2] is also linked to the Leviathan or sea monster of the OT (see on 12:3). Like the dragon that calls this creature from the depths, the first beast is the enemy of God and his people. Also like the dragon (12:3), this beast has κέρατα δέκα καὶ κεφαλὰς ἑπτὰ (*kerata deka kai kephalas hepta*, ten horns and seven heads), but the order reverses the dragon’s “seven heads and ten horns.” This is because the heads are the main feature with the dragon, while the horns are the main feature with the beast. The diadems are on the heads of the dragon, but here there are δέκα διαδήματα (*deka diadēmata*, ten diadems) “on his heads.” Primarily, the imagery of the seven heads and ten horns parallels the description of the dragon, showing that the beast is united with the dragon and yet has a separate role. This begins another parody or great imitation: While the dragon usurps the role of God, the beast from the sea usurps the role of Christ (with the second beast or “false prophet,” the three become the false trinity in 16:13). That the diadems are on the horns of this beast indicates that while the dragon is the king of the evil empire, the beast is the military arm of the king, a parody of the “seven horns” of the Lamb in 5:6 (see the discussion of the imagery of “horns” there).

At the same time, this imagery also alludes to Dan. 7. Several (Krodel, Kraft, Beale, contra Mounce) believe that the seven heads are the sum of the heads of the four beasts in Dan. 7 (the third beast had four heads). The ten diadems on the ten horns refer to the ten horns of the fourth beast, and those ten horns are ten kings who follow him (Dan. 7:7, 20, 24). In Dan. 7 the four beasts and the ten kings portray nations who attack and persecute Israel; in 7:23–25 the ten kings and another king (the little horn of Daniel, also representing the Antichrist) both blaspheme “the Most High” and persecute “his saints.” Note the parallel with Rev. 17:12–14, where the angel interprets the ten horns of the beast as ten kings. For a short time (“for one hour”), these ten kings will be given authority by God “to wage war against the Lamb.” But their final doom is certain. In other

words, the beast from the sea is the Antichrist, who will stand against Christ and try to usurp his authority and power (see excursus below). Only Christ is “King of kings and Lord of lords” (19:16; note his “many diadems” in 19:12).

The beast also has **ὄνομα βλασφημίας** (*onoma blasphēmias*, a name of blasphemy) written on each of the heads. As noted above, Dan. 7:25 speaks of the little horn that will “speak against the Most High,” and the beast here will follow suit. His blasphemous claims to deity and his demands to be worshiped in place of God and Christ form the core of his hideous work. In light of the problem of the imperial cult discussed especially in chapters 2–3 above, these blasphemous names probably allude to the titles of divinity attributed to the Roman emperor (“lord,” “savior,” “son of god,” “our lord and god”). Böcher (1999: 25) calls John’s purpose here “Vaticinium ex eventu,” calling the empire the beast and the second beast the militant imperial cult with its propaganda. He believes John did so in order to guarantee its fall prophetically. Aune (1998a: 776–78) provides an excellent survey of the imperial cult in the first century. While the Greeks gave divine status to living rulers, the Romans traditionally did not declare their emperors gods until after their deaths. However, this was more the case in Rome itself, and the provinces often deified a living emperor, probably to signify the presence of the emperor in their lands as well.^[3] The province of Asia was especially known to proliferate such temples to the emperor. Still, the Roman senate normally restricted their use of titles, reserving “god” for deceased emperors. But Domitian changed the rules and demanded such titles for himself, even calling for sacrifices to himself in Rome. Friesen (1993: 31–33) sees the imperial cult as the major focus of the chapter. The emperor-worshiping temple of the Sebastoi in Ephesus had the images of gods on second-story columns and believed that the emperor brought the gods and seekers together. Thus, the emperor was the formal point in uniting the human and the divine. The Antichrist will renew such practices, but even here, as we will see in 13:5 below, the beast makes such blasphemous claims only because God allows him to do so, and his period of blasphemy is short and controlled from on high.

As the head and torso of the beast appear, animal characteristics predominate (13:2). It is clear, however, that John is not trying to describe any specific animal, for it has seven heads but only a single mouth. The details are apocalyptic symbols and are to be taken individually rather than as a whole portrait. His purpose is to present a beast that is incredibly hideous and completely horrifying, for it is the embodiment of all that is evil. These build on the four beasts of Dan. 7:4–7, in which four successive empires are prophesied as resembling a lion, a bear, a leopard (or panther), and a beast with iron teeth and ten horns. Here the body is like a leopard, the feet like a bear’s, and the mouth like a lion’s. The main difference with Dan. 7 is that there the four beasts are consecutive empires while here they describe one being. In short, this beast is a composite of all the beasts or empires throughout human history that have stood against God and his people (though the Antichrist is a person and not just an empire—cf. the excursus below—he embodies them all). It is possible that the combination refers to the speed (or perhaps the cruelty) of the leopard, the power of the bear (the feet), and the terrifying roar of the lion (the mouth), but that is somewhat speculative. The major point is that this beast sums up all that have gone before it.

(ii) Authority of the Beast (13:2c)

The intimate connection between the dragon and the beast from the sea is obvious in that the dragon **ἔδωκεν** (*edōken*, gave) him his three most essential possessions and attributes. Another imitation of God is seen in that the dragon “gave” authority to the beast, since elsewhere in the book it is God who gives authority to do things (see **ἐδόθη** [*edothē*, the divine passive “was given”])

in 6:2, 4, 8, 11; 7:2; 8:2, 3; 9:1, 3, 5; 11:1, 2; 12:14; 13:5, 7, 14, 15; 16:8; 19:8; 20:4). This usurpation of divine authority is a basic characteristic of the dragon and the beast in these chapters. First, Satan gives the beast τὴν δύναμιν αὐτοῦ (*tēn dynamin autou*, his power), namely, the strength to accomplish miracles (as in 13:3) and perform mighty deeds in the eyes of the world. Second, the beast receives τὸν θρόνον αὐτοῦ (*ton thronon autou*, his throne), perhaps better figuratively “his dominion” (so Mounce 1998: 247), to fit the other two attributes. The beast receives “sovereignty” over this world from “the god of this world” (2 Cor. 4:4). Finally, the dragon gives the beast ἐξουσίαν μεγάλην (*exousian megalēn*, great authority) over “every tribe, people, language, and nation” (13:7). This authority echoes the third beast (the leopard) of Dan. 7:6, which “was given authority to rule.” It is this authority that causes the earth-dwellers to worship first the dragon (13:4) and then the beast (13:4, 12–13). There is also a progression of authority from the dragon to the first beast (13:2, 4), on to the second beast (13:12), and then to the ten kings who serve the beast (17:12–13). Still, God is the true sovereign, for the power to give authority is ultimately his, and the dragon’s authority is both temporary (13:5) and surpassed by the authority God gives to his avenging angels (14:18; 16:8), especially to the angel with “great authority” who destroys Babylon the Great in 18:1.

Excursus: The Antichrist

The only NT uses of ἀντίχριστος (*antichristos*, antichrist) occur in the Johannine epistles. In 1 John 2:18 John alludes to the early church’s teaching, “You have heard that the antichrist is coming.” From this we know that there was a developed teaching about such a being in the early church, but no NT book provides such explicit information. John then adds, “Even now many antichrists have come,” referring to false teachers in the churches. The term occurs three other times (1 John 2:22; 4:3; 2 John 7), all referring to false teachers. These heretics were precursors of the final Antichrist and were the “spirit of antichrist” (1 John 4:3) at work in this world. It is clear that a major function of the Antichrist will be deceptive false teaching that leads many astray and results in the apostasy of huge numbers of professing Christians (Matt. 24:10–12; 2 Thess. 2:3).

Perhaps the first NT reference to a coming antichrist is found in the Olivet discourse, where Jesus speaks of the abomination of desolation as a person (Mark 13:14), using the masculine participle ἑστηκότα (*hestēkota*, standing) in contrast to the neuter βδέλυγμα (*bdelygma*, abomination) that it modifies. As Gundry (1993: 741) states, this alludes to the masculine participles in Dan. 9:26–27 (cf. also Dan. 11:31; 12:11), where it applies to Antiochus Epiphanes and his sacrilege of the temple in 167 B.C. The sacrilegious act of Antiochus IV as prophesied in Daniel became the precursor of the Antichrist theme in Jewish teaching. Antiochus IV called himself “Epiphanes” because he viewed himself as the “manifestation” of his patron god Olympian Zeus, and he set up an altar to Zeus on top of the altar in the Jerusalem temple (see 1 Macc. 1:54). Antiochus, the “little horn” of Daniel, became the prototype for the theme of an Antichrist or supreme opponent of God on earth. Later in the chapter (Mark 13:22), Jesus describes also the ψευδόχριστοι (*pseudochristoi*, false messiahs), who were pretenders to the messianic office in the first century.

The next place the Antichrist is mentioned is in 2 Thess. 2:1–12, where the “man of lawlessness” is discussed (see Bruce 1982: 175–78, especially his “Excursus on Antichrist,” 179–88). About ten years before 2 Thessalonians was written (A.D. 40), the emperor Gaius (Caligula) had threatened to set up a statue of himself in the Jerusalem temple because the Jews were not accepting his divine status. This potential “abomination of desolation” might well have been in Paul’s mind as he wrote. Although Caligula was assassinated in A.D. 41, ending his insane desires, another would come whose

evil will would not be checked until the eschaton. In other words, just as Nero became a model for the beast in Rev. 13 (see below), so Caligula became a model for the “man of lawlessness” in 2 Thess. 2. Paul talks there of the removal of the “restraining power” (probably government and its control of law and order), allowing the “lawless one,” the Antichrist, to appear. Like the little horn of Dan. 7:8 (“speaking boastfully”), 8:25 (“he will cause deceit to prosper and will consider himself superior”), and 11:36 (“he will magnify himself above every god and will say unheard-of things against the God of gods”), this lawless one will “oppose and exalt himself over everything that is called God or is worshiped, so that he sets himself up in God’s temple, proclaiming himself to be God” (2 Thess. 2:4). As in Rev. 13:13–14, he will display all kinds of counterfeit miracles, based on “the work of Satan,” to prove his claims and will work through deceit.

Watson (*DLNT* 51) and Aune (1998a: 753–54; see his interesting summary of “The Biography of the Beast,” 1998b: 942–43) note two types of an anti-Messiah figure in late intertestamental Judaism, one a tyrant from outside who opposes God and oppresses his people, built on the little horn of Daniel; the other a false teacher from within the community who deceives the people, possibly built on the false prophet who opposes the “prophet like Moses” in Deut. 18:18–22. These two are combined in the man of lawlessness of 2 Thess. 2 but separated in the two beasts of Rev. 13. Here the “beast from the sea” (13:1–10) is the military tyrant, while the “beast from the earth” (13:11–18) is the false prophet (he is called that in 16:13; 19:20; 20:10). As with the dragon, the figure behind the “beast from the sea” is undoubtedly Leviathan, the chaos monster of the deep, who was defeated by God at creation (Ps. 74:14) but still often represented empires that oppressed Israel and stood against God (Isa. 30:7; Jer. 51:34; Ezek. 29:3; Ps. Sol. 2.25–26). In Asc. Isa. 4.1–13 Beliar will descend “in the form of a man, a king of iniquity” and will both persecute the people of God and claim that he is the Lord; there this Beliar incarnate is undoubtedly Nero, the “murderer of his mother” (there was widespread speculation that Nero had done so). Similarly, Qumran also expected a being “from Belial” who would become a “terror” and turn Jerusalem into “a bulwark of godlessness” (4QTest 22–24). Sibylline Oracles 3.63–74 describes the coming of Beliar to perform seductive miracles and lead astray even some among the faithful. In Apoc. Elijah 3.5–13 the “son of lawlessness” will cause the sun to fall and the moon to turn to blood; he will perform many counterfeit miracles and set himself up as a false messiah. Thus, the Antichrist theme developed late in the intertestamental period and was not a full-fledged emphasis until the Christian era. There is not a lot of evidence, but we can say it probably began with Jesus (Mark 13:14) and had become a developed doctrine by the time John wrote his epistles (1 John 2:18). The only explicit passages on it are in 2 Thess. 2 and Rev. 13, but it was certainly an important issue for the early church.

Some (R. Charles; Mounce; Yarbro Collins 1976; Sweet; O’Donovan 1986: 83; Beagley; Bauckham 1993b: 450–52; Roloff; Beale) believe that the beast is not a person but an empire, since the beasts of Daniel are world empires. In particular, they identify the beast with the Roman Empire, seen in its world domination and through the imperial cult taking upon itself the prerogatives of God. However, there are many indicators that the Antichrist will be a person who is the embodiment of the evil empire (for the beast as an empire and a person, see Johnson, Chilton, Krodel). While the beast sums up the beasts of Daniel, he is also the fulfillment of the “little horn” of Daniel, Antiochus Epiphanes (see above). Also, if the dragon is a personal being, so must be the beast, his offspring. The description of the two beasts in chapter 13 fits an individual rather than an empire, and the rest of the NT expects a person, from Mark 13:14 (“he is standing”) to 2 Thess. 2 (“the man of lawlessness”) to the “many antichrists” of 1-2 John, who are individual false teachers, as proleptic

of a final Antichrist (1 John 2:18). Therefore, it is likely that the beast is the Antichrist figure expected in NT prophecy, the person who will lead the empire called Babylon the Great (14:8; 17:5; 18:2, 10).

(iii) Fatal Wound Healed (13:3a)

One of the seven heads of the beast is ὥς ἐσφαγμένην εἰς θάνατον (*hōs esphagmenēn eis thanaton*, as slain unto death). This is clearly another great imitation, for ἐσφαγμένην was used in 5:6 for the Lamb that was “as slain.” The emphasis in the twice-repeated θάνατος is on the reality of his death (the use of the genitive in the second instance is descriptive, “mortal wound”), and we know from 13:14 that the πληγή (*plēgē*, wound)^[4] was inflicted by a sword (the “sword” was a symbol of that Roman authority, called *ius gladii* [see on 2:12], that executed Christ).^[5] Thus, the parody of Christ’s passion exists at several levels. Moreover, the following ἑθεραπεύθη (*etherapeuthē*, was healed), which says the beast returned to life after his “mortal wound,” is a parody of Christ’s resurrection. In 13:14 it says the beast ἐζήσεν (*ezēsen*, lived), the very term used for Jesus’ resurrection in 2:8. Therefore, this is another of the great imitations that dominate these chapters and further demonstrates that the dragon and the beast can only copy what God and Christ have already accomplished (on the “christological parody,” see Bauckham 1993b: 431–41). At the same time, there is an allusion to Gen. 3:15, where the serpent is told: “He will crush your head.” There the defeat of the serpent/dragon is prophesied, but here the beast pretends to revive from that disaster. As we know, that pretense is short-lived indeed (see 19:20, where the beast and false prophet are “thrown alive into the fiery lake of burning sulfur”).

Here, however, it says that it was μίαν ἐκ τῶν κεφαλῶν αὐτοῦ (*mian ek tōn kephalōn autou*, one of his heads) that was slain. In 17:9–11 we are told that the “seven heads” of the beast are “seven hills” that symbolize seven kings and that the beast is “an eighth king [who] belongs to the seven and is going to his destruction.” It is clear that the seven kings are Roman emperors (see that passage for the various combinations that have been suggested), so the question here is which one would be intended. Those who have a corporate view of the beast as the Roman emperor believe this was the chaos that reigned in A.D. 68–69 after the suicide of Nero, when civil war broke out and three pretenders claimed the throne in a single year. The recovery of the empire under Vespasian seemed miraculous. Those who take the beast as an individual point to two possibilities: Caligula contracted a serious illness and recovered, so some have linked this with that evil emperor. However, the majority link this with the *Nero redivivus* (“Nero revived” from the dead) legend.

Kreitzer (1988: 97) notes three stages in the development of this legend: pagan expectations regarding the historical return of Nero; quasi-mythical expectations assimilated to Jewish apocalyptic; and wholly mythical associations of Nero with Beliar, adversary to God (cf. Sib. Or. 5.28–38, 93–110, 137–61, 214–27, 361–80). Due to his terrible reign, Nero was censured by the senate on June 8, A.D. 68, and was declared an enemy of Rome. The next day at his villa on the outskirts of Rome, he took his life by plunging a dagger into his neck (cf. Rev. 13:14). Many refused to believe he had died, and by the late 80s a legend became popular that he was still alive (some forms of the story had him coming back from the dead) and living in Parthia, preparing an army of Parthians to invade and retake his throne. Several impostors tried to come to power by claiming to be Nero. During Domitian’s reign, one almost succeeded, but Domitian talked the Parthians into executing the man (Tacitus, *History* 2.8; Suetonius, *Nero* 57; cf. Yarbrough Collins 1976: 176–83; Bauckham 1993b: 423–31; Aune 1998a: 738–40). The main problem with this is the thought that John believed the myth and thought Nero was the Antichrist. However, that is not necessary. Just as God fashioned

the woman, dragon, and child vision (12:1–6) after the Apollo legend and so on, so he fashioned the vision of the beast after the Nero legend. Neither is true, but the form becomes a “redemptive analogy” to tell the readers that what they knew as legend would become history. The beast was not Nero but a Nero-like figure. Moreover, while it was “one of the heads” that died in 13:3, in 13:14 it is “the beast” himself that is “wounded by the sword and yet lived.” Thus, it is the Antichrist himself and not just one of the kings that is killed.^[6]

(iv) Universal Worship of the Dragon and Beast (13:3b–4)

As a result of the counterfeit resurrection, the world ἐθαυμάσθη (*ethaumasthē*, was amazed), a term used often of the crowds who are “amazed” at Jesus’ miracles and flock after him (Matt. 8:27; 9:33; 15:31; Mark 5:20). The term ὅλη ἡ γῆ (*holē hē gē*, the whole earth) parallels “the whole world” in 3:10; 6:12; 12:9; and 16:14, and refers to the earth-dwellers, the same ones who in 17:8 are “amazed” (same verb) at the beast and are described as those “whose names have not been written in the book of life.” They are deceived by the miracle (see also 13:13–14; 16:14) and do what the crowds failed to do in Jesus’ ministry: worship the beast. Aune (1998a: 737) notes correctly that ὀπίσω (*opisō*, after) implies a verb like “went” or “followed,” thus meaning their amazement led them to “follow after” the beast as his disciples.

These followers turn adherence into worship (13:4). The heart of idolatry in the OT was to worship another so-called god in place of Yahweh (Exod. 20:3; 34:14; Deut. 6:4; Ps. 44:20; Jer. 1:16; 11:13). The church of John’s day would have again thought of the imperial cult, “the throne of Satan” (Rev. 2:13), and of emperors like Caligula, Nero, and especially Domitian, who demanded to be worshiped as gods. They also would have thought of the Nicolaitan cult, with its participation in such evil worship (2:6, 14–15, 20–25). Further, to worship the beast (or the emperor) is to worship the satanic power behind him, for demonic forces at all times stand behind idol worship. The reason they worship the dragon is that “he gave his authority to the beast,” a reference back to 13:2c (the article in τὴν ἐξουσίαν, *tēn exousian*, is probably anaphoric, pointing back to v. 2c) and to Dan. 7:6 (the third beast that “was given authority to rule”) that lay behind it. This theme of idolatrous “worship” of the beast will be a frequent refrain in following chapters and will separate true “worshippers” (14:7; 15:4; 19:4, 10; 20:4; 22:9) from false (13:8, 12, 15; 14:9, 11; 16:2; 19:20).

These idolatrous worshipers of the beast make two liturgical affirmations. First, they say, Τίς ὅμοιος τῷ θηρίῳ (*Tis homoiōs tō thērīō*, Who is like the beast?), a parody of the acclamation of Yahweh (Exod. 8:10; 15:11; Ps. 71:19; 89:8; Isa. 44:7; 46:5; Mic. 7:18). God alone is incomparable, and the beast once more is usurping what belongs only to God. Second, they say, Τίς δύναται πολεμῆσαι μετ’ αὐτοῦ (*tis dynatai polemēsai met’ autou*, Who is able to make war against him?). This is the same language as 12:7, where Michael and his angels “make war against the dragon.” Thus, we already have the answer to the question: the forces of God are able to go to war against the beast, and in 12:11 the saints “conquer” the dragon (in 13:7 God allows the beast to “conquer” the saints for a time). Here we are at the heart of the “blasphemy” (13:1, 5) of the beast, deceiving the nations into worshiping him as God (cf. also 2 Cor. 4:4, where the “god of this world has blinded the minds of unbelievers”).

(b) God’s Control over the Beast’s Activities (13:5–8)

This section centers on the key word ἐδόθη (*edothē*, there was given), which as we have often seen (6:2, 4, 8, 11; 7:2; 8:2, 3; 9:1, 3, 5; 11:1, 2; 12:14) is a divine passive demonstrating divine control over

all things, including the forces of evil. Neither Satan nor the beast can do a single thing without permission from God. This verb occurs in three places in this paragraph, and therefore there are three major activities of the beast that God allows it to do: blaspheme (13:5–6, where it occurs twice), conquer the saints (13:7a), and control the nations, causing them to worship him (13:7b–8).

(i) God Allows Blasphemy and Slander (13:5–6)

In 13:2a the beast was described as having “a mouth like a lion”; here we see how the lion roars, namely with boastful words of blasphemy. Once more, this echoes the little horn of Daniel, specifically Dan. 7:6 LXX, which says regarding the third beast, ἐξουσία ἐδόθη αὐτῇ (*exousia edothē autē*, authority was given it), and 7:8 LXX, where the little horn has στόμα λαλοῦν μεγάλα (*stoma laloun megala*, a mouth speaking great things). John has combined these images, as God gives the beast both στόμα λαλοῦν μεγάλα and ἐξουσία. The present participle λαλοῦν (all the other verbs in the verse are aorist) emphasizes the ongoing nature of the blasphemy. As Porter (1994: 23, 302–3) states, the use of the present makes the blasphemous claims the foreground or climactic action of the narrative. This “boastful speaking” was one of the primary characteristics of the little horn (Dan. 7:11, 20), and it focused primarily on his speech “against the Most High” (7:25). Also, the evil king will “exalt and magnify himself above every god and will say unheard-of things about the God of gods . . . until the time of wrath is completed” (Dan. 11:36). Here these μεγάλα are further defined^[7] as βλασιημίας (*blasphēmias*, blasphemies), which means literally to “abuse” or slander the name of God and refers to the beast claiming the name of God for himself and demanding that the nations worship him instead of God (13:6). The use of μέγας for these pretensions of “greatness” is deliberate, for throughout the book this term has been used for the “great” acts of God (e.g., 8:8, 10; 12:14; 18:21; 19:17; 20:11) and the “great” voices of his angelic heralds (1:10; 5:2, 12; 7:2, 10; 8:13; 10:3). In contrast, the forces of evil claim greatness for themselves (14:8; 16:19; 17:1; 19:2), especially the “great dragon” (12:3, 9). Thus, these claims are properly called “great [i.e., insolent] words” (so Betz, *EDNT* 2:401).

Second, the beast is given ἐξουσία,^[8] ironic in that in 13:2c the dragon had already given his offspring, the beast, “his power and his throne and *great authority*.” It is clear that the beast’s authority merely appeared to come from Satan; in reality, God was the true source. However, God allows that authority to be exercised only for a limited time, namely “forty-two months” (cf. Dan. 7:25; 12:7), a reference to the three-and-a-half-year period that comprises this final period in human history (Rev. 11:2; see also “1,260 days” in 11:3 and 12:6; and “time, times, and half a time” in 12:14). When all these references are put together, the beast has authority during this final brief period to “trample the holy city” (11:2) and persecute the saints (13:7) even while they are protected by God (12:6, 14) and the two witnesses both prophesy and triumph over the forces of evil (12:3). The death of the two witnesses and the conversion of some among the nations will end this God-appointed period, and then the eschaton will arrive (see on 11:11–13). Again, it is clear that God is the one in control, not the Antichrist. As stated above, this goes back to Dan. 7:6 but also to 7:25, where the evil king will “speak against the Most High and oppress the saints,” and “the saints will be handed over to him for time, times, and half a time.”

Bauckham (1993b: 425–29) demonstrates the close relationship between Asc. Isa. 4.2–13, which centers on Nero as the Antichrist, and Rev. 13. That passage says Beliar will “descend . . . in the form of a man, a lawless king” (cf. Rev. 13:1), who will “persecute the plant that the twelve apostles of the Beloved have planted” (cf. Rev. 13:7). He “will say, ‘I am the Lord and before me there was no one’” (cf. Rev. 13:6), with the result that “all people in the world will believe in him” (cf. Rev. 13:8),

and “he will rule for three years and seven months and twenty-seven days” (cf. Rev. 13:5, 12). Thus, there was a common apocalyptic tradition in the early church in which the Antichrist would claim divinity for himself but wield authority only for a short time as God so wills it.

When the beast “opens his mouth to blaspheme God” (13:6, the natural result of the “name of blasphemy” on his heads in 13:1), three things are blasphemed: God, his name, and the heaven-dwellers (see below on “tabernacle”). To slander “the name of God” is to usurp his name and to demand the worship due only him (13:8). As Jesus says in the Lord’s Prayer, the concern of every believer is to “keep his name sacred” (Matt. 6:9; Luke 11:2), a major OT theme (Exod. 20:7; Ps. 111:9; Isa. 5:16; 52:5–6; Ezek. 20:41; 36:20). To profane his name is the greatest blasphemy of all. In Dan. 8:9–12 the little horn “grew until it reached the host of heaven” (like the goal of the tower of Babel) and “set itself up to be as great as the Prince of the host.” In this “truth was thrown to the ground,” as will happen when the beast comes to power.

Second, the beast blasphemes τὴν σκηνὴν αὐτοῦ, τοὺς ἐν τῷ οὐρανῷ σκηνοῦντας (*tēn skēnēn autou, tous en tō ouranō skēnountas*, his tabernacle, namely those who inhabit heaven”). Unlike the NIV, which places “and” between the two, it is clear that the heaven-dwellers are pictured here as being God’s “tabernacle” (note the absence of a conjunction and the repetition of σκηνή in the two parts). As Aune (1998a: 744–45) shows, σκηνή does not refer simply to God’s dwelling or to the Jerusalem temple but to the ancient tabernacle (cf. Acts 7:44; Heb. 8:5; 9:2–3; 13:11) and possibly even the Holy of Holies (Heb. 8:2; 9:2, 3, 12, 24, 25). While “those who dwell in heaven”^[9] could be angels,^[10] we have already seen in 12:12 that this phrase is used for the saints (on earth as well as in heaven) in contrast to “those who inhabit the earth” (13:8, 12, et al.). At first glance, it seems startling to have the saints identified with God’s tabernacle, but in 11:1 the redeemed were linked to “the temple of God and the altar,” so this is another instance of that association. Also, in 21:3 the verb and noun are used of the New Jerusalem to describe the heavenly reality, “Now the dwelling (σκηνή) of God is with his people, and he will live (σκηνοῦν) with them.” In other words, God’s heavenly tabernacle is not just a place but a people, and to blaspheme his people is to blaspheme his place. Blasphemy is of course directed primarily at members of the Trinity, but in the OT (Isa. 52:5; Ezek. 35:12–15), intertestamental Judaism (1 Macc. 2:6; 2 Macc. 8:4; 12:14), and the NT (1 Pet. 4:4; cf. Acts 13:45; 18:6) those who bear the name of God and Christ can be “slandered” or “blasphemed” in his name. This refers to both verbal and physical abuse as the Antichrist and his followers persecute the believers. As Beale (1999: 697) points out, this echoes Dan. 8:10–13, where the “end-time tyrant ‘caused some of the host [of heaven] and some of the stars to fall to the earth’” and “overthrew the place of his sanctuary.” Here the beast likewise directs his blasphemous abuse to both heavenly powers and the saints (the “hosts of heaven” in Daniel).

(ii) God Allows the Beast to Conquer the Saints (13:7a)

In 11:7 the beast ascends from the abyss and “makes war against” the two witnesses, “conquering” and “killing” them. The same language is used here, as God permits the beast ποιῆσαι πόλεμον μετὰ τῶν ἁγίων καὶ νικῆσαι αὐτούς (*poiēsai polemon meta tōn hagiōn kai nikēsai autous*, to wage war against the saints and to conquer them).^[11] In Dan. 7:21 the little horn “was waging war against the saints and defeating them, until the Ancient of Days came and pronounced judgment in favor of the saints of the Most High, and the time came when they possessed the kingdom.” That is the pattern here. Once more, even this ultimate act of abuse directed against God’s people by the beast is under his sovereign control. Only in 11:7 and 13:7 does the beast “conquer” the people of God, and it is short-lived. In the very act by which the beast believes he has conquered the believers,

namely their martyrdom, 12:11 tells us that they “conquer him” by “the word of their testimony; they did not love their lives even to the point of death” (see also 15:2). This is one of the basic paradoxes of the book—as the dragon and the beast conquer the saints, they are conquered by the saints. This replicates the defeat of Satan by Christ. When Satan plotted the death of Christ and entered Judas in order to place Christ on the cross, he was sealing his own fate. As he “conquered” Christ, he was “conquered by Christ.” When the saints enter “the fellowship of his suffering” (Phil. 3:10), they share his ultimate victory through seeming defeat.

(iii) God Allows the Beast to Receive Universal Worship (13:7b–8)

The temporary ἐξουσία (*exousia*, authority) that the beast was given by God in 13:5 (cf. vv. 2, 4) is now defined as power “over every tribe, people, language, and nation.” This is the fifth of seven times this fourfold formula occurs (5:9; 7:9; 10:11; 11:9; 13:7; 14:6; 17:15); it refers to the unbelieving nations that follow the beast, oppose God, and persecute the saints. The beast will have total control over them, and they will obey his every whim. One must note, however, that this is a second limitation of his powers. In 13:5 he has a temporal limitation (forty-two months to do his work), and here he has a spatial limitation, restricting his influence only to the earth-dwellers. He has no power over God’s people in the ultimate sense. He can of course persecute and kill them (13:7a), but his “authority” extends only to the nations who worship him. As I said earlier (see comments on 12:9), his power over the saints is physical, not spiritual. He cannot overpower them, only deceive them through lies and temptation. This same limitation applies to his offspring, the beast.

The “earth-dwellers” not only bow to the beast’s authority, but also προσκυνήσουσιν αὐτὸν πάντες (*proskynēsousin auton pantes*, all will worship him, 13:8). Of the eleven times “inhabitants of the earth” occurs in the Apocalypse (3:10; 6:10; 8:13; 11:10 [twice]; 13:8, 12, 14 [twice]; 17:2, 8), this is the only passage to stress that “all” the earth-dwellers were involved, thus stressing the universal nature of the worship. Moreover, while aorists have predominated in 13:5–7, John switches to the future tense προσκυνήσουσιν here to stress the futurity of the event. The universality of the worship was not fulfilled in the imperial cult or any situation in John’s day. As Aune (1998a: 746) states, “This cannot then refer to any situation in the past or present but must refer to the eschatological future when the rule of the beast will include the entire known world.” Verses 7b–8a are a parody of Dan. 7:14, where “one like a son of man . . . was given authority, glory, and sovereign power; all peoples, nations, and those of every language worshiped him.” Beale (1999: 699) shows the threefold pattern of Dan. 7 in this section: “(1) the granting of supreme authority (Dan. 7:14a) (2) over everyone on earth who will offer worship (Dan. 7:14b), (3) all of which is directly associated with a cosmic ‘book’ (Dan. 7:10b).” Thus, the beast again imitates the glory, authority, and worship of which only Christ is worthy. Beale (1999: 700) then calls the beast’s authority and worship “an ironic taunting prelude to the coming victory of the Son of man.”

The most significant statement about the earth-dwellers is not that they follow the beast and worship him but that οὐ γέγραπται τὸ ὄνομα αὐτοῦ ἐν τῷ βιβλίῳ τῆς ζωῆς^[12] (*ou gegraptai to onoma en tō biblīō tēs zōēs*, their name has not been written in the book of life; cf. 17:8). The grammar switches from the plural “those who inhabit the earth” to the singular relative pronoun οὗ^[13] (*hou*, whose) to stress that “not one single person” among the earth-dwellers is named in the Lamb’s book of life. The “book of life” is found five other times in Revelation (3:5; 17:8; 20:12, 15; 21:27) and refers to the divine register for true believers. The first biblical mention of such a book occurs in the golden calf incident, when Moses asked God to “blot me out of the book you have

written” (Exod. 32:32–33) if he would not forgive the nation. Further background is found in the register of the citizens of Israel (cf. Ps. 9:5; 87:6; Isa. 4:3) as well as similar citizen registers in the Greco-Roman world. Especially relevant is the heavenly book in which the names of the righteous were kept (Ps. 69:28; Dan. 12:1). In the Apocalypse this book refers to the security of the believer, who is a citizen of heaven no matter what the forces of evil do. Here it refers to those who because of rebellion and rejection of the gospel have no access to heaven—they are “inhabitants [only] of the earth.” The image is especially drawn from Dan. 7:9–10 (where the Ancient of Days is seated on his throne, and “the books were opened”) and 12:1 (where Michael will deliver “everyone whose name is found written in the book”). These are the true people of God.

Moreover, this is the *Lamb’s* book of life.^[14] It was the “blood of the Lamb” that won the victory over the dragon for the saints (12:11), and this is the major title in the book for Christ, occurring twenty-eight times. The phrase τοῦ ἁρνίου τοῦ ἐσφαγμένου (*tou arniou tou esphagmenou*, the Lamb that was slain) is taken from the first appearance of the title in 5:6, which stressed the great victory of the Lamb and his worthiness to open the seals. The cross made the book of life possible, for it was the slain Lamb that became the sacrifice for sin and enabled the people of God to have “life.” Thus, the final victory does not belong to Armageddon or the final battle of 20:7–10. Those are simply the last acts of defiance by an already defeated enemy. No, the final victory was achieved on the cross by the Lamb of God.

It is highly debated whether ἀπὸ καταβολῆς κόσμου (*apo katabolēs kosmou*, from the foundation of the world) modifies “the book of life written” (KJV, REB, NIV, Swete, Caird, Johnson, Sweet, Chilton, Aune) or “the slain Lamb” (NRSV, NLT, R. Charles, Morris, Harrington, Beasley-Murray, Mounce, Wall, Michaels, Beale). The word order favors “slain” as the antecedent, but the parallel in 17:8 favors “written” (“whose names have not been written in the book of life from the foundation of the world”). If it were to modify “the book of life written,” it would provide a major predestinarian statement like Eph. 1:4–5, and indeed that is the message in Rev. 17:8. But it is better here to respect the word order and recognize that it is God’s redemptive plan that has been established “from the foundation of the world.” That is the message of 1 Pet. 1:18–20 (“You were redeemed . . . with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect . . . chosen before the creation of the world”). This does not demand a supralapsarian view of divine history (God decreed the fall because he had already predestined his Son to die on the cross), for “the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world” is based on God’s knowledge of the fall rather than his predestining the fall. This phrase occurs ten times in the NT and refers to a wide variety of things that are at the heart of salvation history: the final kingdom (Matt. 25:34), the hidden mysteries (Matt. 13:35), the blood of the prophets (Luke 11:50), the Father’s love for the Son (John 17:24), the chosen believers (Eph. 1:4), the book of life (Rev. 17:8), and the suffering and death of Christ (Heb. 4:3 [“his work”]; 9:26; 1 Pet. 1:20; Rev. 13:8).

(c) Parenthesis: Significance for Believers (13:9–10)

John interrupts the description of the war between the beast and the people of God with a warning to believers. He introduces the prophetic call (13:10) by utilizing a simplified version (omitting “what the Spirit says to the churches”) of the call to hear from the letters to the seven churches (2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22). These repeat Jesus’ call, “Let the one who has an ear to hear listen” (Mark 4:9, 23; 8:18; Matt. 11:15; 24:15; Luke 8:8; 14:35), which functions as a prophetic warning both to listen to and to obey the kingdom truths. Here this saying probably functions as a transition, exhorting the reader especially to heed the command of 13:10 but also to listen carefully to the

message of 13:1–8. Still, it is most closely tied to 13:10, for it is introduced with the same particles that introduce the two halves of 13:10, εἴ τις (*ei tis*, if anyone). The use of the condition-of-fact εἰ in all three clauses might assume that there are believers willing to hear in the same way that there are those who are about to be imprisoned or killed, but Wallace (1996: 706) lists this as an example of a general rather than a concrete use of εἰ. In other words, this warning does not assume that all the saints are listening, a situation that would fit the chaotic situation in the seven churches of chapters 2–3.

By repeating the command to heed from the seven letters, the vision addresses not just the saints of the final period of history but also believers of John’s day. My position (see “Methods of Interpretation” in the introduction) is that these futuristic passages must be understood at three levels: the saints of the “tribulation period” (the futurist approach), the Christians of John’s day (the preterist approach), and believers in our own day (the idealist approach). This is made explicit here with the repetition of the warning to the seven churches. God is here giving instructions regarding the conduct of his people in the face of massive persecution. He demands that we “open our ears” to hear and obey these instructions. To refuse to listen is obviously to invite disaster and divine judgment.

The prophetic instructions come in a four-line proverbial saying (13:10) made up of two couplets centering on the danger of captivity and of the sword, respectively:

εἴ τις εἰς αἰχμαλωσίαν (*ei tis eis aichmalōsian*, if anyone is for captivity)
εἰς αἰχμαλωσίαν ὑπάγει (*eis aichmalōsian hypagei*, to captivity they are going)
εἴ τις ἐν μαχαίρῃ ἀποκτανθῆναι (*ei tis en machairē apoktanthēnai*, if anyone is to be killed by the sword)
αὐτὸν ἐν μαχαίρῃ ἀποκτανθῆναι (*auton en machairē apoktanthēnai*, by the sword they must be killed)

The grammar of this prophetic wisdom saying is difficult (on the text-critical problems, see the additional notes). Neither protasis has a main verb, and it is best to assume that some form of the divine “must” is to be supplied due to the context of divine sovereignty from 13:5–8, thus, “If it is God’s will that anyone be taken captive, then he must go into captivity.” The present tense ὑπάγει in the second line is the only main verb in the four clauses, and it is probably a prophetic present continuing the sense of the divine will, “they are going to/must go into captivity.”

This exhortation alludes to Jer. 15:2, which has four couplets,

Those destined to death, to death;
those to the sword, to the sword;
those for starvation, to starvation;
those for captivity, to captivity.

In Jer. 43:11 this becomes a threefold formula: “He will come and attack Egypt, bringing death to those destined for death, captivity for those destined for captivity, and the sword for those destined for the sword.” The context of Jeremiah, however, is quite different from that of Revelation. There these are punishments on the nation for sin and apostasy, while here they are due to attacks by the beast and his followers. There the cause is unfaithfulness, here it is faithfulness to Christ. Thus, the judgment oracle of Jeremiah has been transformed into a prophetic call to the people of God to join in Jesus’ “fellowship of suffering” (Phil. 3:10) and to be willing to follow his model of 1 Pet. 2:23, “When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly.”

The Christians in Smyrna were told, “The devil is about to throw some of you into prison to be

tested, and you will experience affliction for ten days. Be faithful to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life” (2:10). Captivity and death have always been the lot of believers, and in the final days under the influence of the Antichrist, this will become a universal experience of the church. In the Olivet discourse, one of the primary sources of imagery in the Apocalypse, Christ warned that “you will be handed over to be persecuted and put to death” (Matt. 24:9) and added that “there will be great distress, unequalled from the beginning of the world until now—and never to be equaled again” (24:21). It is likely that Christ was speaking of the destruction of Jerusalem as a proleptic anticipation of this final “great tribulation” period. Martyrdom is a frequent image in Revelation (2:13; 6:9–11; 7:14; 11:2, 7; 13:7; 14:13; 16:6; 17:6; 18:24; 20:4), and here we see God’s instructions for the proper Christian response to their persecutors—pacifism! As Barclay (1959: 293) says, resistance is futile; one can only wait for God. But more than this, while the believers actively decry the evil of this unholy empire in their witness and certainly refuse to follow the commands of the beast to accept his mark (13:16–17), they passively accept their lot of suffering. This is an important correction to the misunderstanding of many (e.g., liberation theologians) who have seen this book as a call to arms, a call to revolutionary opposition against oppressive, evil governments. On the contrary, the only action allowed believers in the book is faithful witness and perseverance in following Christ. They must not just submit to the beast but even more to divine providence (so Swete, Chilton, Giesen, Thomas). As in the OT, it is Yahweh who wins the wars on behalf of his people, and the message is clear: do not make war against the beast; that is the work of God. Live faithfully and persevere in witness, but leave the battle to the Lord.

John then adds a commentary on the significance of the prophetic call. Ὡδε (*hōde*, in this case, moreover) is used four times in ensuing chapters (13:10, 18; 14:12; 17:9) to provide John’s own explanation of the ethical significance of the vision. The best translation would probably be “this demands” in light of the critical nature of the ethical response. The call to passivity mandates ἡ ὑπομονὴ καὶ ἡ πίστις τῶν ἁγίων (*hē hypomonē kai hē pistis tōn hagiōn*, endurance and faithfulness on the part of the saints). The use of the article with each noun distinguishes the emphasis of each, but it is clear that they supplement each other. In 2:19 (“I know your works, namely your love, faith, service, and endurance”) and 14:12 (see below), the two terms also appear in the same context. Both terms are critical in the book, with ὑπομονή introduced in 1:9 as “endurance in Jesus” and then a dominant ethical demand in the seven letters (2:2, 3, 19; 3:10). One could argue that this provides the horizontal dimension of the whole book, the command for faithful endurance in the midst of terrible persecution. The last time the term appears in the book is 14:12, “This calls for patient endurance on the part of the saints, those who obey God’s commandments and remain faithful to Jesus.” The picture of steadfast endurance stands in obvious contrast to the rage of the dragon (12:12, 17). Πίστις does not occur as frequently (2:13, 19; 13:10; 14:12) as πιστός (1:5; 2:10, 13; 3:14; 17:14; 19:11; 21:5; 22:6), but together they deepen the meaning of “endurance,” adding the aspect of being “faithful” or remaining true to Christ. In 2:10, 13 martyrdom is in mind, being “faithful to the point of death,” and this is certainly the thrust here. The saints win their victory over Satan by “not loving their lives even to the point of death” (12:11) and by trusting God to defeat the forces of evil on their behalf (6:11).

Summary and Contextualization

Satan’s final rebellion will be waged relentlessly. To fight this great battle against God and his people, he parodies the Holy Trinity and establishes his own false trinity: the dragon (himself),

the beast from the sea (the Antichrist), and the beast from the earth or false prophet (the religious leader of the movement). The dragon uses these creatures to gain control of both the governmental and religious apparatus, creating both a one-world government (with the Antichrist as “king of kings”) and a one-world religion (with the Antichrist as the idol of the world). This combination of political and religious control is the core of the absolute power of the false trinity over the nations. This has always been Satan’s method, from the Egyptians in Moses’ time to the Babylonians and Persians of Daniel’s day to the Romans of John’s day to the Nazis and Stalin in the twentieth century. The people of God have always been both persecuted and led astray into idolatry and immorality by the same evil forces (Rev. 2:14, 20). In other words, the material here about the final Antichrist also fits the many “antichrists” that have preceded, of both the political and the religious variety.

The first beast gains control by parodying Christ’s death and resurrection but in a far more public forum. When he returns from the dead, his associate, the false prophet, will use the event to forge a new world religion with the beast, and behind him the dragon (13:3–4, 12), as its focus. This replicates the imperial cult of John’s day and builds on those features. The beast will be the final “Nero Caesar” and will both blaspheme the name of God by taking the divine titles for himself and persecute the saints. Again, this tendency for world leaders to arrogate to themselves divine powers and to pretend that their actions are answerable to no one (note the “lawless one” of 2 Thess. 2:3–4) is seen everywhere today as well. The message of 13:5–8, 14–15 is critical. Though the beast and his followers believed their “authority” had been given by Satan (13:2), it is clear that the ultimate authority had come from God. The blasphemous names (13:5–6), the worship of the nations (13:7b–8), the power to perform miracles and deceive (13:14–15), and even the persecution of the saints (13:7a) happened only because God allowed it. There is no true power in evil. God is in firm control, and it can do no more than is part of the divine will. Nothing in the world, from Croatia to Rwanda to the moral wasteland that is modern America, escapes his notice, and it will end at his predetermined time. At the end of history, the Antichrist will control the economics of the world. Nothing will be bought or sold without his “mark,” and many “Christians” will capitulate to the pressure (the “great apostasy” of Matt. 24:4–5 and 2 Thess. 2:3). But that also is seen today, where the idol of too many Christians is the dollar sign and so many in our churches put economic success ahead of following God.

As the saints go through their terrible tribulation, the ethical requirement of 13:9–10 is tough. They are passively to accept their imprisonment and martyrdom and place their trust entirely in God. John calls for “endurance and faithfulness” (13:10b), which the saints are to exemplify by refusing to take action against the forces of evil but instead oppose it by continuing their proclamation of the gospel, following the lead of the two witnesses (11:3–6) and the angel with the eternal gospel (14:6–7). Their victory against Satan is seen in their deaths (12:11). The two beasts both persecute and deceive the saints, but God allows this to test them and to bring out their victorious response. To reciprocate evil for evil, violence for violence, is to fall into the hands of the enemy, to yield to the deceptions of the devil. This is the lesson Jesus told Peter when he drew his sword and cut off the ear of the high priest’s servant: “Put your sword back in its place. For all who draw the sword will die by the sword” (Matt. 26:52). This does not mean we sit idly by and allow evil to triumph. Rather, we take a prophetic stance and warn evil rulers of the folly of their actions, but we do so as part of our gospel proclamation, not as part of a revolutionary plot to overthrow. When one is put to the sword as a result of that bold proclamation, it is “endurance and faith” that gives one the courage to face martyrdom.

Additional Notes

13:1. While several good manuscripts have the plural ὀνόματα (A 046 051 2053 et al.), the singular ὄνομα also has good support (□⁴⁷ B C P et al.). While the Τά of the plural could have been accidentally omitted, the singular could have also been changed to a plural due to the influence of the accompanying κειאלός. While a difficult decision, it seems the more difficult reading—and, hence, the one most likely to be authentic—would be the singular, since later copyists would be attracted to the context of plurals in the verse.

13:3. The passive ἐθαυμάσθη is a deponent here (see BAGD 352), but some manuscripts (051 etc.) have ἐν ὅλῃ τῇ γῇ to explain the clumsy passive.

13:6. It is clear that ancient scribes wrestled with this clumsy apposition. While the best textual support is for the appositional reading here (B* A C 046^c 94 etc.), some add καί before τοὺς (B^c P 046* 051 etc.) in order to smooth out the reading (resulting in a reading like the NIV), while □⁴⁷ omitted τοὺς σκηνοῦντας (resulting in “his tabernacle in heaven”) in order to eliminate the connection between the tabernacle and the saints.

13:8. οὗ οὐ γέγραπται τὸ ὄνομα αὐτοῦ: An extremely difficult text-critical problem is linked to the antecedent of οὗ. Many ancient scribes, believing that πάντες is the antecedent, altered the relative pronoun to ὧν and also altered ὄνομα to ὀνόματα in order to harmonize it with the plural antecedent. However, Michaels (1992: 92–94) argues that the correct antecedent is not πάντες (thus the unsaved) but rather αὐτόν (thus the beast). That is an intriguing possibility, but throughout the Bible the book of life concerns human beings rather than celestial beings, so it is more likely that the unbelieving earth-dwellers are the focus. Thus, the singular pronoun would stress each individual within the group of unbelievers.

13:10. Scribes were obviously confused about the meaning of this cryptic passage, and both couplets have text-critical problems. In the first couplet, the reading adopted above is found only in A vg Ps-Ambrose, but it is the most difficult reading and best explains the others. Many of the best manuscripts (□⁴⁷ B C P 046 1006 1611 etc.) have omitted the first εἰς αἰχμαλωσίαν, almost certainly due to a sight error. Several scribes also added ἀπάγει (616 1828 1854 1862 etc.) or συνάγει (2059 2081 TR) to supply a verb, thus changing the focus from God to the persecutors (“if anyone leads [the saints] into captivity”).

13:10. In the second couplet, again Alexandrinus by itself (as followed above) has the best reading. As Metzger (1994: 675) explains, several scribes were apparently influenced by Matt. 26:52 (“All who draw the sword will die by the sword”) to change the thrust to one of retribution. Several (C P etc.) add some form of indicative ἀποκτείνω as well as δεῖ to read, “If anyone kills with the sword, they must be killed by the sword.” That is unlikely, however, because it does not fit the context and reverses the meaning from the first statement. It is better to see both couplets following Jer. 15:2 and mandating passivity and dependence on God in the light of opposition. Still, Beale (1999: 704–5) notes rightly that the first couplet could allude to Jer. 15:2, with the second assuring those who suffer that their persecutors will be punished by God on the basis of their sins (“If anyone kills, they will be killed”). But the context is one of persecution rather than vindication, so the accepted reading is preferable.

(2) The Beast from the Earth—the False Prophet (13:11–18)

This second beast becomes a member of the false trinity in 16:13, where he is labeled “the false prophet” (see also 19:20; 20:10). His task is to perform the counterfeit miracles that cause the world of unbelievers to worship and follow the dragon and the beast from the sea (13:13–15; 16:14). While the first beast has a more military function (conquering the saints and taking over the world), this one has a more religious function, deceiving the world into worshipping the Antichrist. Michaels (1997: 164) relates the relationship to “the state and a state church. The beast from the sea is a secular political power, while the beast from the earth is a religious institution fostering worship of the first beast.” Yarbro Collins (1992a: 301) takes the beast from the earth to be the ruling families of Asia controlling the wealth and power of the region, and this is viable for those who take the beast from the sea to be the Roman Empire. As stated in the excursus on the Antichrist, this beast is more likely a person who fulfills the Jewish expectation of a false teacher or prophet in the end times. Some believe this is the imperial priesthood that promoted the imperial cult (Barclay 1959: 293; Beasley-Murray; Yarbro Collins 1992a: 301; Bauckham 1993b: 446–47; Beagley 1987; Aune), but it cannot be restricted to that. It refers also to the “false messiahs” of Mark 13:6, 22 and to the “great apostasy” of 2 Thess. 2:3. Also, if the dragon and the Antichrist are individual beings, as I have argued above, this third creature is probably one as well.

- (a) Beast described (13:11)
- (b) Work of the false prophet (13:12)
- (c) Deception through counterfeit miracles, leading to idolatry (13:13–15)
- (d) Mark of the beast (13:16–17a)
- (e) Number of his name (13:17b–18)

Exegesis and Exposition

¹¹And I saw another beast ascending from the earth, and he was having two horns like a lamb but spoke like a dragon. ¹²He exercised all the authority of the first beast on his behalf, and he made all the earth and its inhabitants worship the first beast, whose mortal wound was healed. ¹³He performed great miraculous signs, namely, causing fire to descend from heaven to earth in front of the people, ¹⁴and he deceived the inhabitants of the earth because of the miraculous signs God gave him to perform on behalf of the beast. He told the inhabitants of the earth to set up an image on behalf of the beast who had been wounded by the sword and lived. ¹⁵And God gave him the power to give breath to the image of the beast, with the result that the image spoke and caused whoever refused to worship the image of the beast to be killed. ¹⁶He also made everyone, the small and the great, the rich and the poor, the free and the slave, to receive a mark on their right hands or on their foreheads, ¹⁷with the result that no one could buy or sell unless they had the mark, which is the name of the beast or the number of his name. ¹⁸Moreover, this demands wisdom. Let the one who has understanding calculate the number of the beast, for it is the number of a person, and its number is 666.

(a) Beast Described (13:11)

Like the first beast (11:7; 13:1), this “other” beast “ascends.” But while the first beast echoed the four beasts of Dan. 7:3 in “ascending from the sea,” this beast echoes the four kingdoms of Dan. 7:17 in “ascending from the earth.” In 7:17 one of the angels interpreted the four beasts as being four kingdoms, so the two beasts of Rev. 13 are intimately connected to one another. As a θηρίον (*thērion*, beast), like the dragon and the beast from the sea, this creature is also built on the

Leviathan theme (see passages listed at 12:3), which further cements the intimate relationship among the three evil beings. In the Apocalypse (see esp. 16:13) they form a false trinity, and Mounce (1998: 255) excellently summarizes their great parody of the Godhead: “As Christ received authority from the Father (Matt. 11:27), so Antichrist receives authority from the dragon (Rev. 13:4), and as the Holy Spirit glorifies Christ (John 16:14), so the false prophet glorifies the Antichrist (Rev. 13:12).”

This “other” beast parodies the description of Christ as the Lamb with seven horns in 5:6.^[1] He has^[2] κέρατα δύο ὅμοια ἀρνίῳ (*kerata dyo homoia arniō*, two horns like a lamb) and so also fits Jesus’ warning against false prophets in Matt. 7:15, “They come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves.” That there are two horns rather than the ten of the first beast (13:1) shows its subordinate role but also alludes to Dan. 8:3, where the “ram with two horns” represents the Medo-Persian Empire in its opposition to God. The horns of the dragon, beast, and false prophet depict the might of the evil forces in control of this world as it stands in defiance against God and his will. Thus, this second beast also ἐλάλει ὡς δράκων (*elalei hōs drakōn*, was speaking like a dragon). Like the Antichrist, the false prophet is the agent of the dragon and speaks with his voice. This is another parody of Christ, who speaks with the voice of the Father (John 5:25–30; 7:16–18). The “voice like a dragon” probably also refers to the same deceptive, lying words that the “ancient serpent” uses to lead the world astray (12:9). The Antichrist was given “a mouth to speak great blasphemies, and . . . opened his mouth in order to blaspheme God and to slander his name” (13:5–6). The second beast will speak with the same voice. This ultimate “false prophet” is probably the one who will arise from within the church and lead the “great apostasy” of 2 Thess. 2:3. First John 2:18 and 4:1–3 speak of the “many antichrists” or false teachers that have arisen to spread heresy in the church. This second beast will be the ultimate “false prophet” who will sum up all the others.

(b) Work of the False Prophet (13:12)

There is an interesting movement from aorist tenses in 13:1–8 to imperfects in 13:11 to present tenses in 13:12–18, undoubtedly for greater vividness in describing the ongoing work of the Antichrist and his false prophet.^[3] Moreover, the central verb is ποιέω (*poieō*, do, make), which occurs nine times in verses 12–16 and emphasizes the incredible activity of the false prophet on his master’s behalf. Note the chain of authority: the dragon gives his authority to the first beast (13:2b), and that beast gives his authority to the second. Here, though, it is ἐξουσίαν . . . πᾶσαν (*exousian . . . pasan*, all authority), meaning the complete transfer of authority from the Antichrist to his agent to accomplish his nefarious work. This authority is accomplished ἐνώπιον αὐτοῦ (*enōpion autou*, before him), which Krämer (*EDNT* 1:462) defines as “at the commissioning of the beast.” He does not do so “before the eyes of the beast” (as if he were the court prophet performing in front of the Antichrist’s throne) but under the authority of the beast.

The second “activity” is to “make the earth and its inhabitants worship the first beast.” While ποιέω is normally followed by an infinitive to indicate the idea of “making,” “causing,” or “bringing about” an action, at times the infinitive can be replaced by a ἵνα (*hina*, that) clause as here. This construction occurs four times in 13:12–17 (vv. 12, 13, 16, 17). In 13:3–4 “one of the heads” of the Antichrist received a “mortal wound” and yet was healed. At first glance one would think that one of the kings mentioned in 17:10 (the interpretation of the seven heads of the beast) was killed. That is true, but this verse tells us that it is the “eighth king” of 17:11, the Antichrist himself, that is killed and then raised from the dead in another “great imitation” of Christ. We are

told here that the “mortal wound” was suffered by the “first beast” himself. The false prophet takes this event and “makes” (another use of ποιῶ) all the earth-dwellers “worship” the Antichrist. In terms of background, Beasley-Murray (1978: 216–17) speaks of the “Commune of Asia,” a council representing the major cities of the province of Asia, whose president was called the Asiarch. This group especially promoted the imperial cult and demanded that citizens participate in it. Of all the emperors, Domitian especially encouraged this, calling himself *Dominus et Deus noster* (“our Lord and God”). While this council was not the “false prophet,” it provided background imagery for the portrayal of his idolatrous practices, as Nero did for the Antichrist, and the original readers would certainly have seen the parallel.

(c) Deception Through Counterfeit Miracles, Leading to Idolatry (13:13–15)

A major focus of his “work” (the third ποιῶ in the passage) is to perform σημεῖα μεγάλα (*sēmeia megala*, great signs), the counterfeit miracles that mirror those of Elijah and Christ as well as the two witnesses of 11:5–6. Moses was described as a prophet who performed such miraculous signs (Exod. 4:17; 7:9–10; 10:1–2), and Elijah and Elisha were justly famed for the spectacular miracles God produced through them. Of course, Jesus was the archetypal messianic prophet, and John’s Gospel is built around his “sign” miracles (σημεῖον) which provided a theological pointer to the significance of Jesus as the Christ. Here it points to the pretension of the false trinity that the beast is the Christ. Deuteronomy 13:1–4 and 2 Thess. 2:9 speak of the “counterfeit miracles, signs and wonders” that typify false teachers and prophets throughout history but especially the work of this paragon of evil at the end of history. This type of counterfeit miracles that deceive was part of Jewish apocalyptic tradition (Sib. Or. 2.165–69; 3.63–70; Asc. Isa. 4.4–10; Apoc. Dan. 13.1–13) as well as frequent in the NT (Matt. 7:15; 24:5–6, 23–24; 2 Thess. 2:9; 2 Pet. 2:3). In particular, the false prophet parodies Elijah, who called down fire from heaven both at Mount Carmel (1 Kings 18:36–39) and with the soldiers sent to arrest him (2 Kings 1:10–14).^[4] In Revelation this miracle is performed both by the two witnesses (11:5) and by God himself at the destruction of Satan’s army (20:9). However, the false prophet calls down fire from heaven ἐνώπιον τῶν ἀνθρώπων (*enōpion tōn anthrōpōn*, in front of the people), which the NIV rightly translates “in full view of men.” It is not a religious act but a public-relations performance intended to enhance the worship of the false trinity. One of the tests of a false prophet is to use prophetic power for self-aggrandizement, to be seen and worshiped by the people (e.g., Jer. 23:9–14; Ezek. 13:1–23).

These counterfeit sign-miracles in Rev. 13:14 are first of all under divine control (the repetition of the divine passive ἐδόθη, *edothē*, was given, from 13:5–8 anchors the action in God’s control of the situation) and second have as their entire purpose to “deceive” the earth-dwellers. Satan is the great cosmic “deceiver,” the “ancient serpent” (12:9), and the “deceiver of the nations” (20:3, 8, 10). God “gives” the false prophet his power to “delude” the nations with counterfeit miracles (13:14; 19:20). In Rom. 1:24, 26 we are told that due to their absolute depravity, “God gave [the Gentiles] over to their shameful lusts.” This is the same principle. Everything the beast and the false prophet do is under God’s control and only by God’s permission. Since the earth-dwellers have rejected God’s offer of salvation and refused to repent (9:20–21), God is “giving them over” to the very “deception” they have already preferred. They have chosen to worship the same demonic powers who tortured and killed them (9:1–19), so God is now allowing them to experience their delusion in all its terrible force. In a sense, God is “delivering them to Satan” (cf. 1 Cor. 5:5; 1 Tim. 1:20). On the basis of the “great apostasy” noted above from Matthew and 2 Thessalonians, however, this deception probably also includes many from within the church who join the earth-

dwellers.

As a result of the “deceptive” powers of this beast from the earth, the “inhabitants of the earth”[5] obey his “orders” (for λέγων, *legōn*, saying, as a “command,” see BAGD 469 [II.1.c]) ποιῆσαι εἰκόνα τῷ θηρίῳ (*poiēsai eikona tō thērīō*, to make an image[6] of the beast), echoing Dan. 3:1–6, where Nebuchadnezzar made a ninety-foot gold idol and “commanded” (in v. 4 Theodotion uses λέγεται, *legetai*, for “command”) the nations to worship it. According to Asc. Isa. 4.11, Beliar “will set up his image before him in every city.” This is also built on the number of idolatrous statues to the emperors in the imperial cult. L. Thompson (1990: 162–63; see also deSilva 1990: 186–90) points out the incredible proliferation of shrines and statues that were part of the imperial cult. Ephesus, for instance, had temples to Julius Caesar, Augustus, the Augusti, Domitian, and later Hadrian. There were imperial statues in buildings, porticoes, fountains, the city gates, and in the streets. Many were in sacred places, where they were objects of veneration. Incense, wine, and bulls were sacrificed, for instance to seal a marriage. Imperial statues could serve as places of refuge for slaves fleeing from their masters; and slaves were given their freedom in front of such statues. Ford (1975b: 214) adds that the imperial cult was especially strong in Asia Minor, with the first temple to Roma built in 195 B.C. and the first to an emperor in Pergamum in 29 B.C. There was at least one in each of the seven cities by the time of Christ. While Augustus and Tiberius forbade emperor worship, Caligula encouraged it, replacing heads on many statues with his own and even trying to set up a statue of himself in the Jerusalem temple. After him, only Domitian likewise encouraged such worship. At Ephesus a major temple was dedicated to Domitian with a statue twenty-two to twenty-three feet high dominating it. Once again, the Antichrist will be the “eighth king” (17:11) who will build on the Roman idolatrous practices and take them to their ultimate conclusion. The constant Jewish and Christian diatribe against idolatry is certainly in mind.

For the third time, John mentions the fatal wound of 13:3, 12. Here we learn that the wound was made “by a sword” and that the beast “lived.” The first may link the event further with the Nero legend, since he committed suicide by thrusting a dagger into his throat. But as Bauckham (1993b: 433) brings out, this could also note the “sword of divine judgment” that issues from Christ’s mouth (1:16; 2:12, 16; 19:15, 21; cf. Isa. 27:1). Indeed, perhaps the use of πληγή (*plēgē*, plague, wound) in verses 3, 12, and 14 brings in the notion of the divine judgment or “plague” on the beast (cf. 9:18–19; 11:6; 15:1–2; 16:9, 21; 18:4, 8; 21:9; 22:18). The second is a clear parody of the resurrection of Christ, with ἔζησεν (*ezēsen*, lived) meaning “came to life” as in 2:8; 20:4, 5. In 13:3, 12 the beast is “healed,” but here he “lives again.”

After the idol is erected, God allows (another ἐδόθη) the false prophet to “give breath” to the image and “make it speak” (13:15). The idea behind δοῦναι πνεῦμα (*dounai pneuma*, to give breath) is not just the false trickery of some priests and sorcerers in the ancient world who would set up pulleys and use ventriloquism to make it seem like the idols were alive but is most likely akin to πνεῦμα ζωῆς (*pneuma zōēs*, the breath of life) given to the two witnesses when they were raised from the dead in 11:11. In other words, the idolatrous statue of the Antichrist came to life and spoke. Here we have a rare example of ἵνα (*hina*, so that) used for result (see Wallace 1996: 473). The result of the life breathed into the statue is that it spoke. Aune (1998a: 762–64) provides an excellent survey of beliefs and practices related to such things in the Roman world. Most intelligent Greeks believed that the idols were not the gods themselves but rather representatives of them. Still, the popular belief was that the gods actually inhabited them. There were many magical rituals for animating the idols and getting them to speak in order to secure oracles. A group of magicians called theurgists would place magical materials (usually stones, herbs, or

scents that contained a spark of the divine in them and were liked by the gods) into the cavity of the statue in order to induce it to talk. This would lead to oracular speech by the priest or the casting of lots that the people believed the god was directing. There were many such sorcerers practicing in the first century. Simon Magus (Acts 8:9–24) was later said to have given life to statues (*Ps.-Clem. Rec.* 3.47), and several scholars (R. Charles, Caird, Ford) name Apelles of Ascalon who practiced before the court of Caligula as well as Apollonius of Tyana, who was a friend of Nero, Vespasian, and Titus. Scherrer (1984: 601–2) tells of a pretender named Alexander the False Prophet, who used horses’ hairs to create a serpent’s head; its mouth opened, its tongue came out, and it spoke. In other words, the Roman world was enamored with magicians and such miracles. But the Antichrist will go beyond such deeds. He himself will be raised from the dead, and his “Minister of Propaganda” (so Bruce 1986: 1616) will cause his statue to come to life and speak.

The second result of the breath of life coming into the statue is that it[7] “caused” (another use of ποιέω) the execution of anyone who refused to worship it. Nebuchadnezzar in Dan. 3:6, 11, 15 also demanded worship of his gold idol on penalty of death, leading to the famous incident of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in the fiery furnace. In Jewish writings the fiery furnace of Dan. 3 became the prototype of Jewish martyrs (4 Macc. 13:9–18; 16:21–25). In John’s day there is no evidence of Domitian making such a decree (though Antipas was martyred in Pergamum, 2:13), but fifteen or so years later Pliny wrote a letter to Trajan (A.D. 112) that he had executed Christians who had refused to offer wine and incense before a statue of the emperor (*Epistle* 96). Beale (1999: 712) believes that this oracle demanding death for nonparticipants is particularly apt in light of the temple to Domitian at Ephesus with its colossal statue. The entire province was required to participate in the rites, and cities held parallel worship in their own temples, requiring that all citizens participate. There is no evidence that the death penalty had been imposed during Domitian’s reign, but public pressure was growing, and it would provide a natural backdrop for this prophecy.

(d) Mark of the Beast (13:16–17a)

The eighth and final ποιέω in 13:12–16 occurs here, as the second beast “makes” everyone receive χάραγμα (*charagma*, a mark) to identify their allegiance to the Antichrist. The emphasis is on πάντας (*pantas*, everyone), meaning every human being, unbeliever and believer. The social categories are made clear to specify every subgroup of humanity, and the repetition of the article before each stresses the individual groups. There are three pairs: the small and the great, the rich and the poor, the free and the slave. The first pair refers to the socially unimportant and the socially significant; the second pair is nearly identical to the first, except that many families among the Roman nobility had lost their wealth but were still important. This type of social-stratification list occurs three times in the book (6:15; 13:16; 19:18, each time in a negative context focusing on the unbelievers), with “the small and the great” occurring three other places (11:18; 19:5; 20:12, each time in a positive context focusing on believers). The purpose in each case is to stress all of humanity and to show that God does not play favorites. There is no distinction between the haves and the have-nots before God or the satanic realm.

Two rules flow out of the demands (ποιέω . . . ἴνα in 13:16–17) of the beasts: the first is to “give”[8] each the mark or seal indicating ownership. Some (Krodel 1989: 255; Roloff 1993: 164) believe this is a parody of baptism as the seal of the Christians. This, however, depends upon the identification of the “seal” in 7:1–8 as baptism, which is doubtful. It is certainly the satanic counterpart of the “sealing” of the saints by God in 7:2–4, another of the “great imitations” that characterize chapter

13. Two OT texts provide background for this. In Deut. 6:8 God told the Jews to place the Shema (v. 4) on their hands and foreheads, the basis of the “phylacteries” (leather pouches containing Scripture passages) worn by orthodox Jews in Christ’s time and today (though they wore them on the left hand rather than the right as here). It is likely that John and his readers would see the mark of the beast as a parody of this as well. Furthermore, in Ezek. 9:4 Yahweh required that the Hebrew letter *tau* be placed on the foreheads of all who had repented of the idolatry of the nation, indicating that they belonged to him. In Ps. Sol. 15:6–9 the mark of the believer (indicating salvation) is contrasted to the mark of the unbeliever (indicating destruction). In Roman practice, tattoos or brands were placed on slaves to indicate ownership as well as on soldiers or on the members of certain cults who devoted themselves to one particular god. These could also be certificates similar to citizenship papers that would identify persons as loyal followers of the emperor. The **χάραγμα** could refer to the “seal” of the emperor used to authenticate such certificates.^[9] The problem with this is the command to “seal” the person on the right hand and the forehead, so it is more likely a tattoo or a brand than a certificate. In 3 Macc. 2:28–29 the Ptolemaic king Philopater I (217 B.C.) forced Egyptian Jews to be registered in a census and then to be branded with the ivy leaf sign of Dionysus. Those who refused were executed. The purpose of such a mark is to signify both the rejection of former loyalties and the absolute acceptance of a new allegiance. Note the resulting polarity: believers are stamped with the “seal” of Christ (Rev. 7:3–4; 22:4), while unbelievers have the “mark” of the beast (13:16–17). There are no neutralities in this war; not to belong to Christ is to belong to the beast.

The second rule (**ἴνα**) is that “no one can buy or sell” without taking the mark. Economic pressure to conform to the beast’s will has precedent elsewhere in the Apocalypse, based on both Jewish and Gentile persecution. As several (Caird 1966: 173; Johnson 1981: 532–33) point out, the Roman government persecuted but did not use economic sanctions against Christians, so this is probably built on local persecutions. In the letters to Smyrna and Philadelphia, the Christians were poverty-stricken (2:9) and of “little strength” (3:8) due to Jewish opposition. In Pergamum and Thyatira, the guild structure that controlled the life of the city placed enormous economic pressure on Christians to conform to the pagan mores (see the introduction to 2:18–29). In 7:16 the believers in heaven “never hunger or thirst” again, and in 21:4 God wipes away every “tear” of “crying or pain.” Thus, believers will lose their jobs and possessions, but God will reward them for all they have lost (Mark 10:29–31). This was true in the first century, it is true today, and it will be true under the universal economic persecution of the Antichrist.

(e) Number of His Name (13:17b–18)

People cannot buy or sell **εἰ μὴ** (*eimē*, unless) they have the **χάραγμα** of the beast, which is now identified with his **τὸ ὄνομα** (*to onoma*, name), and this name is further identified^[10] with **τὸν ἀριθμὸν τοῦ ὀνόματος αὐτοῦ** (*ton arithmon tou onomatōs autou*, the number of his name). Again we have the great imitation: believers have the “name” of Christ on their foreheads (22:4), while the unsaved have the “name of the beast” on theirs. The ancient practice called “gematria” was based on the fact that letters of the alphabet were also used as numbers in counting. The first nine letters were the numbers one to nine, the next nine signified the tens to the nineties, and so on. Therefore, every Hebrew name or word also had a numerical significance, and ancient rabbis would make interesting connections between words or phrases with the same numerical value. Mounce (1998: 260) gives an example, a graffito from Pompeii, “I love her whose name is 545.” It is virtually certain that the number here refers to a name and not a phrase, and it is also likely that the cryptic

reference was known to John's readers (making very unlikely the attempt of modern prophecy buffs who try to link the number with modern names like Henry Kissinger or Ronald Wilson Reagan).

Perhaps no verse in the Bible has received more prolonged speculation than 13:18. The number of the beast down through the centuries has been linked with literally hundreds of different possibilities. On the whole, John's opening observation, Ὡδε ἡ σοφία ἐστίν (*hōde hē sophia estin*, this demands wisdom) has been totally ignored in the heedless rush to link 666 with all kinds of strange and wonderful suggestions. In a context like this, Ὡδε, which normally has a local thrust ("here"), draws a conclusion from the previous statement ("in this case, moreover"; see BAGD 895). Thus, John is saying that "in light of" the coming mark of the beast, the readers need σοφία. Due to the critical nature of this "wisdom" here, it may be better to translate as in 13:10, "This demands." The call for wisdom is followed by a call for νοῦς (*nous*, understanding). This call alludes to Dan. 12:10 ("those who are wise will understand"), which refers to the knowledge of the end times that God will give his people. This call also parallels Mark 13:14 (par. Matt. 24:15), which prophesies the "abomination that causes desolation" and then adds, "Let the reader understand," a similar call for wisdom at a crucial apocalyptic juncture. In other words, this is seen as a critical point of the passage, and John is calling for his readers to exercise extreme care and divinely guided wisdom in interpreting this number. It also means that he expected his readers to understand it, pointing further to the solution as centered in first-century rather than twentieth-century symbolism.

Of the competing solutions for understanding "the number of the beast," several are more viable than others (combining Beale 1999: 720–27; and Aune 1998a: 771–73): (1) the names of various world leaders (the pope, Hitler, Mussolini); for example, Sib. Or. 5.1–51 alludes to emperors from Alexander through Hadrian by means of gematria; and the initials of the Roman emperors from Julius Caesar to Vespasian (omitting Otho and Vitellius) equals 666; (2) chronological, calculating the duration of the Antichrist's reign and linking it with an empire (e.g., Rome, Islam, Nazi Germany); (3) apocalyptic riddles with symbolic significance, like Sib. Or. 1.324–30, in which the name Jesus adds up to 888 (Ι = 10; η = 8; σ = 200; ο = 70; υ = 400; ς = 200), an interesting contrast to the number of the beast, 666 (Walvoord, Ladd); (4) a symbol for the Antichrist or anti-Christian powers, in which 666 is an ultimate number for humanity in rebellion against God, symbolizing incompleteness (seven signifies perfection or completeness in the book) and sin (so Morris, Beale); (5) a triangular number, specifically the sum of the numbers 1–36 (= 666), with 36 itself the triangular number of the integers 1–8 (= the beast as the eighth king, 17:11) (so Lohmeyer, Farrer, Bauckham 1993b: 393–94). Irenaeus (*Against Heresies* 5.30) mentions three other possibilities held in the early church: "Euanthas" (unknown), "Teitan" (the Titans in mythology or perhaps Titus, who destroyed Jerusalem in A.D. 70 and later became emperor), and "Lateinos" (the Roman Empire).

With all of these possibilities, we must begin with the text, which tells us that 666 is ἀριθμὸς . . . ἀνθρώπου (*arithmos . . . anthrōpou*, the number of a person).^[11] The one most frequently named is "Nero Caesar" (e.g., R. Charles; Beckwith; Yarbro Collins 1976; Sweet; Chilton; Krodel; Roloff; Bauckham 1993b: 390–407; Giesen; Aune; Böcher 1999: 26). When transliterated into Hebrew, it is נרעסס נרעסס , which adds up to 666 (100 = נ ; 60 = נ 200 = נ ; 50 = נ ; 200 = נ ; 6 = ך ; 50 = נ). This may be supported by the alternative reading 616, which appears in C Tyconius and a couple of minuscules mentioned by Tischendorf. The Latin form of "Nero Caesar" transliterated into Hebrew adds up to 616.^[12] The major problem is that the primary spelling of "Caesar" in Hebrew is נרעסס , and the added *yodh* would make the tally 676. However, Aune (1998a: 770) points to an Aramaic document

from Wadi Murabba'at that transliterates "Nero Caesar" without the *yodh*, so this remains a possibility. Still, there are other problems with the "Nero Caesar" interpretation. One has to assume that transliterating Greek names into Hebrew and using that for gematria connections was somewhat commonplace and that there were sufficient Jewish Christians in the congregations of Asia Minor to explain such a practice. However, Bauckham (1993b: 389–90, who believes 666 combines gematria and triangular numbers) has shown that the practice of using Greek words transliterated into Hebrew characters can also be found in 3 Bar. 4.3–7 (written about the same time as the Apocalypse) and was not uncommon within Jewish apocalyptic. The greatest problem of linking 666 with "Nero Caesar" is the absence of such an interpretation in the church fathers. But the presence of "616" in later manuscripts (see above) could represent such an understanding, and two other factors could mitigate this: the Book of Revelation was widely disputed in the ancient church and hence was neglected by many of the fathers, and the tendency was to historicize the book and so to interpret it in terms of contemporary events.

In short, the best option is "Nero Caesar," but it is no more than a tantalizing possibility. It is important to note that if the identification with Nero were to be adopted, this does not mean John believed the Nero redivivus legend and expected Nero to return shortly. Rather, the coming Antichrist would be a Nerolike figure who would be the antitype of that evil anti-Christian. In this sense, the use of 666 as the threefold counterpart (with 666 used similarly to "holy, holy, holy" in Rev. 4:8) to the completeness of seven and the absolute perfection of "Jesus" as 888 could well also be intended (so Rowland 1999: 355). He is "incomplete incomplete incomplete" compared to the ultimately perfect "Jesus" (888). In the final analysis, we must remain uncertain regarding the actual meaning of 666. The above discussion is as far as we can go; only first-century readers knew, though it is hard to say how much they knew.

Summary and Contextualization

It is essential to realize that Satan's war against humanity is primarily a religious war. His original rebellion was probably first of all a self-centered desire for adulation, and that continues through this final book of the Bible. The second beast is in a sense the high priest of the imperial cult, demanding the worship of the beast and, through him, of the dragon himself. The best way to understand the implications of this section is to employ once more the three approaches—the preterist, the idealist, and the futurist perspectives.

From the preterist point of view, John's readers would have seen in this passage the high council of the region and the priesthood of the imperial cult placing pressure on them to participate in emperor worship. They were expected to take part in the guild feasts as well as the temple ceremonies. Moreover, this had economic repercussions, for to refuse to do one's civic and religious duty could cost you not only your status in the community but your job as well, and possibly your life (as Antipas in Pergamum, cf. 2:13).

From an idealist perspective, in the same way that there are "many antichrists" (1 John 2:18) today, there are also many false prophets, namely, false teachers drawing people away from Christ to worship false gods. Never in history have there been as many cults as today (estimated at ten thousand, with the number growing every day), and religions like Islam are becoming more militant all the time. Quite possibly the most insidious religious movement of our time is not even labeled as such—secularism. This is a religion because people make success their god and their bank account their true temple. Moreover, this religion can have significant economic

repercussions, for Christians have lost jobs for refusing to follow the “rules.”

From a futurist perspective, it is the thesis of this commentary that the passage describes the final “tribulation period” of history, when the beast/antichrist comes to power and the second beast/false prophet becomes the prime minister, or high priest, of the evil empire, forcing the world to make a choice between Christ and the beast. After the Antichrist is assassinated and comes back to life, the false prophet will erect a statue and bring it to life, thus inaugurating the period when every person will either accept the “mark” or die. It will become a capital crime to refuse to participate in the universal worship of the beast. While at the present period in history it seems unthinkable that such a state of affairs could occur, we must remember that we are only seventy years removed from the rise of Hitler and Stalin, and it is pure arrogance to think something similar could not happen again. If anyone could solve the terrorist crisis, the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, and the unrest in Africa and bring peace to our troubled world, people would rush to worship such a person.

Additional Note

13:15–17. Chilton (1987: 341–44) provides a preterist interpretation of the “image of the beast” and the “mark of the beast.” For him the evil empire of chapter 13 refers to the attempt of apostate Judaism to eradicate the church. When the image of the beast “speaks” (13:15), it is an “apostate Jewish attempt to re-create the world” (341), and they also enforced submission to the emperor and organized boycotts against Christians, going so far as to put them to death. Thus, Israel as such has been “‘marked’ with the seal of Rome’s total lordship” (342), and the false prophet is the Jewish leaders. The “image of the beast” is the Jewish demand that their adherents worship not the true God but “the synagogue itself” (344). This approach is problematic, however, because the seven letters make clear that the problems in the churches stemmed only in part from Jewish opposition. The symbols point far more to pagan opposition and the imperial cult than they do to purely Jewish opposition. Chilton has to force too many of the images to fit his hypothesis.

b. Song of the 144,000 (14:1–5)

This is an incredibly rich chapter, especially since it contrasts the future of the saints with that of the sinners. The entire book has been organized as a series of juxtaposed scenes contrasting the heavenly realm with the earthly, the vertical world centering on the presence of God and the Lamb with the saints, and the horizontal situation in which the forces of evil seem to triumph over the saints. Chapter 1 depicts Christ walking among the lampstands, protecting and in control of the churches, while chapters 2–3 show the persecution and heretical movements arrayed against the church. The majesty of the throne room vision (chaps. 4–5) contrasts with the imperial cult (chaps. 2–3), and the judgments of the seals (chap. 6) contrast with the sealing of the saints and the joy of the multitudes in heaven (chap. 7). The trumpet judgments (chaps. 8–9) are answered with the promise to the church that the scroll, God’s plan for ending this age, will involve suffering (bitterness) but will result in vindication (sweetness; chap. 10). The place of the church in these end-time convulsions is seen in both the measuring of the temple and the ministry of the two witnesses (chap. 11), and again it will involve both suffering and vindication. Comparing 12:11 with 13:7, we see that the death of the saints will be their victory over Satan, and his apparent victory will actually be his defeat. The war of the false trinity against the people of God (chaps. 12–13) sets the scene for this picture in chapter 14 of the victory of the saints and the eternal punishment of those who have willingly been the instruments of the actions of the dragon against the saints.

This is the fourth of six sections of the great interlude of chapters 12–14, as indicated by the marker **καὶ εἶδον** (*kaieidon*, and I saw): 12:1–18 (first and therefore without the marker); 13:1–10; 13:11–18; 14:1–5; 14:6–13; 14:14–20. Thematically, however, there are two major sections in this interlude: chapters 12–13 on the war of the false trinity against God and his people, and chapter 14 on the actions of God and his people in response. This vision also has two parts, the glory of the saints (14:1–5), and the judgment of the sinners (14:6–20). In the latter section, there are the messages of the three angels: the earth-dwellers have the “eternal gospel” offered to them (14:6–7) and then are warned of imminent total destruction (14:8–13, 14–20). This first section (14:1–5) gives us another glimpse of the glory awaiting those who faithfully respond to the evil that oppresses and tempts them (cf. 13:9–10). They have to choose between the mark of God (7:3–4) and the mark of the beast (13:16–18), and that means a choice between death and life in this world (to reject the mark of the beast is to die) and between life and death in the heavenly world (to accept that mark is to die for eternity). Those who choose faithfulness to God are now seen in their victory and joy. As such this section is in deliberate contrast to 13:16–18. The earth-dwellers go through this final period of history stamped with the Antichrist’s mark on their forehead, but the 144,000 have the name of the Lamb and of God and so sing a “new song” of joy and triumph. Schüssler Fiorenza (1986: 124–25) states that 14:1–5 consists of a vision (v. 1), an audition (vv. 2–3), and an explanation (vv. 4–5) that provides a “‘timeless truth’ about discipleship, victory, and sacrifice” on the part of the saints.

- i. The Lamb on Mount Zion with the 144,000 (14:1)
- ii. Saints sing a new song (14:2–3)
- iii. Triumphant character of the redeemed (14:4–5)

Exegesis and Exposition

¹And I looked, and behold the Lamb was standing on Mount Zion, and with him were the 144,000 having his name and the name of his Father written on their foreheads. ²And I heard a sound from heaven like the sound of many waters and like the sound of loud thunder. The sound I heard was like the sound of harpists playing their harps. ³And they sang as it were a new song before the throne and before the four living creatures and the elders, and no one was able to learn the song except the 144,000 who had been redeemed from the earth. ⁴These are the ones who refused to defile themselves with women, for they are virgins. These are those who follow the Lamb wherever he goes. These were purchased from humanity as firstfruits for God and the Lamb. ⁵No lie was found in their mouths; they are blameless.

i. The Lamb on Mount Zion with the 144,000 (14:1)

The contrast between the beast and the Lamb is paralleled by a contrast between the beast's followers with his mark stamped on their foreheads (13:16–17) and the Lamb's followers with the name of the Lamb and of his Father written on their foreheads. While the dragon stands on the shore of the sea awaiting the emergence of the beast (12:17–18), the Lamb is standing^[1] on Mount Zion awaiting the victorious saints. There is considerable debate as to whether this is an earthly scene (Swete, R. Charles, Krodell, Michaels, Aune) or a heavenly one (Kiddle, Lohmeyer, Lohse, Giesen, Sweet, Mounce). With the presence of the “new song” (cf. 5:9) and the parallel in Heb. 12:22 (“You have come to Mount Zion, the heavenly Jerusalem”), a good argument can be made for the heavenly interpretation. The mention of the “sound in heaven” in Rev. 14:2 favors the earthly interpretation, however, for it differentiates Mount Zion and heaven. Still, the Lamb elsewhere is in heaven with the redeemed (7:9), and he does not come to earth until the parousia (19:11–16). Thus, this could be a proleptic vision of the millennial reign of the Lamb and the redeemed (so Beckwith, Walvoord, Thomas) or perhaps of the New Jerusalem in 21:1–2 (Ladd 1972: 189–90). Beale (1999: 732) is probably correct in saying that “an ‘already-and-not-yet’ end-time view of Zion is in mind,” blending past, present, and future aspects. In other words, there is a twofold thrust—it is an earthly scene but anticipates a future reality.

Therefore, the Lamb and the 144,000 stand in triumph on Mount Zion. In the prophetic tradition, Zion came to signify not just the Temple Mount but the location where the Messiah would deliver his people and gather them to himself. As Jerusalem was the capital of Israel, Mount Zion is to be the capital of the renewed kingdom of God to be established by the Messiah (Joel 2:32; also Ps. 48:2–11; Isa. 2:2; 24:23; Mic. 4:1–8; 2 Esdr. [4 Ezra] 13:35–40; 2 Bar. 40.1–2). As Aune (1998a: 803) notes, the idea of “standing” is a military metaphor and pictures the Lamb as a divine warrior ready to annihilate his enemy. The saints are seen as participating in that joyous victory (see Rev. 2:26–27; 17:14). Thus, this is the place of deliverance and glory, celebrating the victory of the saints over the false trinity. As stated in 7:1–8, the 144,000 are the church, those who have remained true to Christ in the midst of great adversity. There is a primary and a secondary thrust: primarily the victorious saints of the great tribulation and secondarily the people of God down through the ages (on the “firstfruits” see 14:4–5). The context on the war with the false trinity favors the more narrow understanding, while the parallels in 7:1–8 and especially 22:4 broaden the interpretation to encompass all believers. The “conquerors” of the tribulation period will take their places alongside the glorified saints of every era. Schüssler Fiorenza (1986: 124) calls the 144,000 “the anti-image of the beast and its followers.”

The 144,000 have on their foreheads τὸ ὄνομα αὐτοῦ καὶ τὸ ὄνομα τοῦ πατρὸς αὐτοῦ (*to onoma autou kai to onoma tou patros autou*, his name and the name of his Father), an obvious contrast to the

mark of the beast (13:16). In 2:17 the overcomers in Pergamum were promised “a white stone with a new name written on it, known only to the one who receives it,” and in 7:3 God placed a “seal on the foreheads” of the 144,000. This combines both of those promises and prepares for 22:4, where “his name will be on their foreheads.” The message is one of ownership and security: God will protect those who bear his name; they are his people. That it is the name of God and the Lamb further extends the major theme of the book, the oneness of the Father and the Son. The Godhead authenticates these saints and identifies them in the words of 21:3b, “They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God.” Since this is primarily an earthly scene, it may well picture the saints at the start of this final period and signify their victorious status before God and the glory that awaits them.

ii. Saints Sing a New Song (14:2–3)

Once again all of John’s senses are utilized. He “sees” in 14:1 and “hears” in 14:2–3. As the saints are with the Lamb on Mount Zion, John hears a glorious song from heaven. Harps and singing are found in 5:8–9; 14:2–3; and 15:2–3, so there is an obvious connection. This “sound from heaven” is very loud. John uses three strong similes (ὥς, *hōs*, like) to describe it: “the sound of many waters,” “a peal of loud thunder,” and “harpists playing harps.” In 1:15 the voice of the “one like a son of man” (cf. 1:13) was “like many waters,” and in 19:6 the hymn of the messianic wedding feast sounded “like the sound of many waters and like loud peals of thunder.” In the Mediterranean basin, the “many waters” would picture the roar of the sea hitting the shore. In 6:1 the living creature called forth the first of the four horsemen in “a voice like thunder,” and in 19:6 the great multitude shouted “hallelujah” like “the sound of many waters and loud peals of thunder.” The hymn of 19:6 celebrates the “wedding of the Lamb” with the church (cf. 19:7), a natural parallel to the celebration here. There is a natural progression in the four hymns: 5:9 celebrates the purchase of people by the blood of Christ; 14:2–3 celebrates the victory of the saints over the beast; 15:2–4 (the “song of Moses . . . and the Lamb”) celebrates the justice of God in the final judgment plagues; and 19:6–7 celebrates the messianic wedding feast. The emphasis on the “loud” nature of the singing is found only here and in 19:6 and marks these two as particularly boisterous celebrations. Aune (1998a: 807) believes these are consecutive experiences, picturing John first hearing indistinct loud singing, then the harpists, and finally the song itself.

The third simile is separated from the other two by the introductory ἡ ἡὼνὴ ἣν ἤκουσα (*hē phōnē hēn ēkousa*, the sound that I heard). The anaphoric article looks back to “I heard a sound” in the first part of the verse, so I translate “and the sound I heard was like the sound of harpists playing their harps.” The Greek is clumsy, with three cognates emphasizing the harps, “harpists harping their harps.” Κιθαρῳδοῦν (*kitharōdōn*, harpists) does not refer just to persons playing harps but rather to those who accompany their singing with harps (BAGD 432). The “harp” was a ten- or twelve-string lyre used often in temple worship (Ps. 33:2; 57:8). In the Apocalypse, harps are mentioned in 5:8; 14:2; 15:2; and 18:22. The first three are hymns, while 18:22 says that harps and music will never again play in Babylon. The combination of the loud singing and the harps emphasizes the tremendous joy and worship that is going on in heaven.

The celestial choir in 14:3 is singing^[2] ὁδὴν καινὴν (*ōdēn kainēn*, a new song). It is difficult to know whether this is the same “new song” of 5:9, but the similarity of context and content (heavenly hymn celebrating the redeemed) makes it likely that it is (so Kraft, Mounce, Krodel). Thus, the content of the song is praise to the Lamb who with his blood purchased the redeemed and made them both a kingdom and priests. Throughout the Psalms, the “new song” (33:3; 40:3;

96:1; 98:1; 144:9; 149:1) is a hymn of praise for the fact that the God of creation has delivered his people as well as a call to the saints to put their trust completely in him. There is also a question as to whether the hymn is sung by an angelic choir (as in 5:9) or by the redeemed themselves (the resurrected martyrs, as in 15:2–4, the other passage with harps and singing). On the whole, those who take an earthly view of 14:1 favor this being the heavenly host, and those who take the heavenly view favor this being the redeemed. That the redeemed must “learn” the hymn makes it more likely that it is the heavenly host singing and that the saints on earth learn it. Beale (1999: 735) points out that in Jewish tradition, praising God with harps and a “new song” was especially linked to the “world to come” (Exod. Rab. 23.11; Num. Rab. 15.11; *b. Arak.* 13b).

The song is sung “before the throne and before the four living creatures and the elders,” with the repetition of *ἐνώπιον* (*enōpion*, before) emphasizing both elements, the throne and those surrounding it. This song belongs in the heavenly court (see 4:3, 4, 6b for the concentric circles of throne, living creatures, and elders in the heavenly court). Therefore, this new song is the highest worship in heaven, and that explains why it can be learned only by the “144,000 who have been redeemed[3] from the earth” (echoing the new song of 5:9, “purchased/redeemed from every tribe, language, people, and nation”), the victorious heaven-dwellers who have overcome the deceptions of the false trinity. This provides a description of true discipleship: victory through sacrifice. Less likely is the claim by Aune (1998a: 809) that only the 144,000 in heaven could learn the new song and therefore neither John nor the 144,000 on Mount Zion (on earth) in 14:1 are included. That is certainly to go beyond the evidence. There is no hint that there were two groups of 144,000, one on earth and another in heaven. Moreover, the basic meaning of *μαθεῖν* (*mathein*), to “instruct” (often in a catechetical context; cf. 1 Cor. 4:6; 2 Tim. 3:7), is certainly intended here. John “heard” the new song (and there is certainly no hint that he could not understand it) from heaven, and it was taught to the redeemed on Mount Zion. The heaven-to-earth trajectory is the most likely scenario. Kraft (1974: 188), building on 1 Cor. 6:20 and 7:23, says that the new song celebrated the Lamb’s emancipation of the believers from slavery.

iii. Triumphant Character of the Redeemed (14:4–5)

The spiritual character and state of the redeemed is given in detail as both a model and a warning to the Christians in the seven churches who are besieged by Jewish and Roman persecution as well as by false teachers. These qualities are presented in three pairs: two pairs introduced by *οὗτοι* (*houtoi*, these: their purity and their relation to the Lamb), with the third pair a concluding statement on their ethical blamelessness. In 2:14 and 2:20 I discussed how *πορνεύω* (*porneuō*, I commit adultery) had a double meaning, referring to both sexual and spiritual (= idolatry) adultery. This is the case here as well. There is considerable debate over their description as those *οἱ μετὰ γυναικῶν οὐκ ἐμολύνθησαν* (*hoi meta gynaiḱōn ouk emolynthēsan*, who refused to defile themselves[4] with women) and the second statement that they are *παρθένοι* (*parthenoi*, virgins). The first verb is a global aorist stating that their lives are characterized by a refusal to pollute themselves with immorality, and the second is a present tense that defines the resultant state, their purity as “virgins.” The moral purity of the 144,000 is stated first negatively and then positively.

Caird (1966: 179) says that when taken by itself this is “John’s most puzzling sentence,” and Sweet (1979: 222) calls it “perhaps the most misunderstood words in the book.” Some (Kiddle, Moffatt, Alford, Glasson, Yarbrow Collins 1976) take these literally and believe they refer to a special group of highly dedicated believers who kept themselves celibate, abstaining from marriage as well

as immorality. [5] R. Charles (1920: 2.8–9) calls them a monastic-type group with an ascetic bias against marriage. The problem with this is that ἐμολύνθησαν refers to moral defilement and would entail a serious denigration of marriage, an attitude missing from passages encouraging celibacy (Matt. 19:12; 1 Cor. 7:1, 32). Therefore, a figurative connotation is much better, identifying the victorious saints as those who refused to participate not only in immorality but in worldly pursuits of all kinds. With the imagery of the bride of the Lamb in 19:7–8 (“fine linen, bright and clean”) and 21:2, the idea of the virgin bride would make a great deal of sense. Israel as the virgin bride of Yahweh was a frequent image in the OT (2 Kings 19:21; Isa. 37:22; Lam. 2:13; Amos 5:2), and 2 Cor. 11:2 speaks of the believer presented to Christ as a “pure virgin” (undefiled by false teaching). This also explains how παρθένοι, normally used of women rather than men, could be employed here for men and women (so Beckwith; Devine 1964; Ladd; Schüssler Fiorenza 1986: 132–33; Harrington; Mounce; Krodel [who applies it entirely to idolatry]). But as Olson (1997: 494) points out, the problem here is the masculine παρθένοι, a rare form that seems to restrict the imagery to men.

As a result of the male image, many hold that this refers to soldiers in a holy war (so Lohmeyer; Farrer; Caird; Beasley-Murray; Schüssler Fiorenza 1986: 133; Chilton; Bauckham 1993b: 230–32; Harrington; Giesen; Michaels) who are required to keep themselves chaste (Deut. 23:9–10; 1 Sam. 21:5; 2 Sam. 11:8–11; 1QM 7.3–6). This would fit several statements in the book: 17:14, Christ’s “chosen and faithful followers” will accompany him as he conquers the forces of evil; 19:14, the “armies of heaven” will be “dressed in fine linen, white and clean”; and 2:27, the overcomer will “dash [the nations] to pieces like pottery.” The idea of holy war is prominent in the Apocalypse, and this could well be part of that emphasis, especially since the war against the saints was so prominent in chapter 13 (esp. 13:7). In 2 Tim. 2:3–4 a “good soldier” does not get involved in “the affairs of this life” (NLT) but always seeks to “please his commanding officer” (NIV).

It is difficult to choose between the “bride of Christ” metaphor and the “holy war” metaphor. The idea of the “virgin” fits the bride imagery better, but the context of holy war in chapters 13–14 fits this latter image better. It is possible that the first clause here (“do not defile themselves with women”) connotes the holy war, and the second (“they are virgins”) connotes the bride of Christ. Olson (1997: 496–501) provides an interesting alternative. He believes the two images of “not defiled by women” and “virgins” are best explained by parallels in the Book of Watchers (1 Enoch 1–36), in passages describing the fallen angels who cohabited with women and “defiled themselves” (1 Enoch 7.1; 9.8; 10.11; 12.4; 15.2–7), disobeying the divine mandate that they remain virgins (15.6–7). Thus, John’s wording contrasts the faithful believers with the unfaithful angels of Gen. 6:1–4. While this cannot be established with any great probability, it is possible and could be taken as a correlative to the holy war view.

The second pair of descriptions of the 144,000 concerns their relationship to God and the Lamb, connoting discipleship. First, οὗτοι οἱ ἀκολουθοῦντες τῷ ἀρνίῳ ὅπου ἂν ὑπάγῃ (*houtoi hoi akolouthountes tō arniō hopou an hypagē*, these are those who follow the Lamb wherever he goes). The idea of “following” Christ is the heart of discipleship in the Gospels (Mark 1:18; 8:34; et al.; seventy times in the Gospels), and John describes Christ as the Good Shepherd who “calls his sheep by name and leads them out . . . and they follow him because they know his voice” (John 10:3–4). Here the “wherever he goes” implies *imitatio Christi*, discipleship that involves suffering and death (“take up his cross and follow me,” Mark 8:34). Aune (1998a: 813) gives an excellent overview of the background. To “follow” means both to adhere to Jesus’ instructions and to promote his cause, a thrust found only in the Gospels and in Rev. 14:4. The idea of following to the point of death also

occurs in Matt. 10:38; Luke 17:33; John 12:25–26; 13:36; 1 Pet. 2:21; Rev. 12:11.

The redeemed were also ἡγοράσθησαν ἀπὸ τῶν ἀνθρώπων (*ēgorasthēsan apo tōn anthrōpōn*, purchased from humanity); this phrase builds on 5:9 (“with your blood you purchased people for God”) and 14:3 (“purchased from every tribe, language, people, and nation”). This is the language of redemption and describes Christ’s death as a payment for sin, buying the saints and presenting them to God. Note the contrast with 13:17, where the same verb is used of the earth-dwellers “buying” earthly goods with the mark of the beast.

Moreover, the 144,000 are presented τῷ θεῷ καὶ τῷ ἀρνίῳ (*tō theō kai tō arniō*, to God and to the Lamb)[6] as ἀπαρχή (*aparchē*, firstfruits). This is a sacrificial image, for in the OT the “firstfruits” were the first and best parts of the harvest offered to God to signify that the crop was his and the farmer was grateful for God’s gift of the crop (see Arnold, *NIDOTTE* 1:659). In the LXX this term translates several Hebrew terms referring to the offering of the firstborn or firstfruits of animals or crops to Yahweh (Num. 18:12; Deut. 18:4; Lev. 23:9–14; et al.) or to priests and Levites (Exod. 25:2–3; Deut. 12:11; et al.) as a thank offering to God. In the NT, Epānetus is called the “firstfruit” (i.e., first convert) in Asia (Rom. 16:5), and the household of Stephanus the “firstfruits” of Achaia (1 Cor. 16:15; cf. also 2 Thess. 2:13). James calls his readers “the firstfruits of creation” (1:18), meaning the beginning of a new creation in Christ. The NT follows the OT in describing the believer as “the first” among many, meaning that God will continue to bless the harvest (of souls). Similar to this passage is 1 Cor. 15:20, where Christ in his resurrection is “the firstfruits of those who have died” (see also Rom. 8:23). He was the guarantee that all the redeemed would follow him. In Rom. 11:16 the conversion of the Gentiles is seen as the first of a great harvest: “If the part of the dough offered as firstfruits is holy, then the whole batch is holy. If the root is holy, so are the branches.” Thus, here the 144,000 are the saints of the tribulation period seen as an offering to God guaranteeing the final harvest of all the believers (the harvest of 14:14–16).

The third pair of descriptions (14:5) concludes the others and depicts their ethical blamelessness (contra Aune 1998a: 822, who calls 14:4a ritual purity and 14:5 moral purity). No ψεῦδος (*pseudos*, lie) is “found in their mouth.” In 2:2 the Nicolaitan “apostles” are proven “false,” and in 3:9 the Jewish persecutors are called “liars.” In 21:8, 27, and 22:15 liars are excluded from the eternal kingdom and thrown into the lake of fire. This term is broader than telling the truth and refers to the faithful proclamation of God’s truths as well as a refusal to surrender to Satan’s deceptions (12:9; 13:14) delivered through liars like Jezebel (2:20) and the false prophet (16:13; 19:20). Beale (1999: 746) and Fekkes (1994: 191–92) see here an allusion to Isa. 53:9 and Zeph. 3:13, “There was no deceit found in his/their mouth.” Like Jesus (Isa. 53:9), the saints (Zeph. 3:13) maintain a true witness for God. As a result, they are ἄμωμοι (*amōmoi*, blameless), another sacrificial term depicting the perfection of the offering laid before the Lord (Exod. 29:1; Lev. 4:3; 5:15). In the NT it is used of the perfect sacrifice of the Lamb (Heb. 9:14; 1 Pet. 1:19) as well as the moral piety of the people of God (Eph. 1:4; 5:27; Phil. 2:15; Col. 1:22; Jude 24). Thus, here it means the 144,000 are without moral blemish. Of course, this does not entail absolute perfection but rather a total walk with Christ and an absolute commitment to God, in keeping with its use elsewhere in the NT.

Summary and Contextualization

There is a three-part message in chapter 14: the vindication of the saints (14:1–5), the final message of salvation and judgment to the nations (14:6–13), and the harvest of the saints (14:14–16) and sinners (14:17–20). The first section, however, also contains both a promise and a warning

to the saints. Those who will stand on Mount Zion with the Lamb and “sing a new song” will be those who have maintained their spiritual purity, the “virgins” who “kept themselves pure” by refusing to participate in pagan worship. It is they who will glory in the eternal joy of being “firstfruits” offered to God and the Lamb. But for those who have failed to “keep themselves pure” (see 2:14–16, 20–23 for this problem in the churches), the warning is severe. This pagan worship and immorality in John’s day parallel the wordliness that is a problem among Christians today, the willingness of all too many who call themselves Christians and attend church regularly to immerse themselves in the selfish and hedonistic “pleasures” of the world around them. The pagan “worship” of today, the idols of many Christians, are money, success, and fleshly pursuits. These people may miss the heavenly joy awaiting the faithful. When Christ “comes like a thief” (3:3; 16:15), they will face divine judgment, while the faithful will experience eternal bliss (14:1–5; 21:1–22:5).

Additional Notes

14:3. One of the more difficult decisions is whether ὥς should be retained (with A C 100 1841 2040 et al.) or omitted (with ⁴⁷ P 046 94 1611 1854 et al.). It could have been added in assimilation to the three uses of ὥς in 14:2, but it could also have been dropped either by a sight error or because the text read better without it. The manuscript evidence and the internal evidence are nearly equal. It is probably slightly better to retain it due to the frequent use of redundant particles in the book.

14:5. Several important manuscripts have γάρ after ἄμωμοι (⁴⁷ P 2344 1611 1006 046 et al.), but it could easily be an echo of γάρ in 14:4, and the reading without γάρ (supported by A C P 1854 2053 2081 et al.) fits the context well. As Metzger (1994: 677) says, the latter reading “is more solemn and entirely appropriate for the author (cf. 16:6).” The addition of ὅτι in some manuscripts (051 2056 2073 2131 2254) makes it likely they were working from a manuscript without a conjunction.

c. Message of Three Angels (14:6–13)

The three angels progressively announce a last opportunity to repent, the imminent fall of Babylon the Great, and the eternal torment awaiting those who follow the beast. There is an inclusion between the first and third, as the judgment flows from refusing the call to repent. At the same time, there is a natural progression. The judgment of 14:7 is spelled out in the destruction of 14:8a and is grounded in the depravity of 14:8b. The message of the third angel then expands both the reason (14:9) and the contents of the judgment (14:10–11). There is a difference of opinion as to whether this passage is primarily addressed to non-Christians (most interpreters) or to Christians (Giesen 1997: 326; Giesen 1996a: 92–94). Giesen argues that in the context of chapter 14, it is addressed to Christians who are given a message of joy that their enemies are to be judged and a warning that they must remain true to Christ. The message to the church is certainly indicated in the call to endurance in 14:12–13, but it is difficult to see why this is an either-or question. The call to fear God and give him glory is meant primarily for unbelievers, but the prophecy of coming destruction is addressed to both, amplifying the warning to unbelievers and shallow Christians and intended to assure the faithful that their vindication is imminent.

- i. First angel with the eternal gospel (14:6–7)
- ii. Second angel predicting destruction (14:8)
- iii. Third angel pronouncing judgment on those who follow the beast (14:9–11)
- iv. Ethical conclusion—call for endurance (14:12–13)

Exegesis and Exposition

⁶And I saw another angel flying in midair, having the eternal gospel to preach to those sitting on the earth, that is, to every nation, tribe, tongue, and people. ⁷He said in a loud voice, “Fear God and give him glory, for the hour of his judgment has come. Worship the one who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and the springs of water.” ⁸And another, a second angel, followed, saying, “Fallen, fallen is Babylon the Great, which made all the nations drink of the wine that leads to passion for her immorality.” ⁹And another angel, a third one, followed them, saying in a loud voice, “If anyone worships the beast and his image and receives his mark on their forehead or hand, ¹⁰they will also drink from the wine of the wrath of God that has been poured full strength into the cup of his anger. They will be tormented in fire and sulfur in the presence of the holy angels and the Lamb, ¹¹and the smoke of their torment is going to ascend forever and ever. Those who worship the beast and his image have no rest day and night, nor does anyone who receives the mark of his name.

¹²This demands the endurance of the saints, namely, that they obey God’s commandments and remain faithful to Jesus. ¹³And I heard a voice from heaven say, “Write, ‘God blesses the dead who die in the Lord from now on.’”

“Yes,” says the Spirit, “they will rest from their labors, for their deeds are going to follow after them.”

i. First Angel with the Eternal Gospel (14:6–7)

The characteristic *Καὶ εἶδον* (*Kai eidon*, And I saw; translated in various ways in 12:13; 13:1, 11; 14:1) introduces a further aspect of the vision. The *ἄλλον ἄγγελον* (*allon angelon*, other angel) occurs in 14:6, 8, 15, 17, 18 and presents a problem because there is no other angel in the immediate context of this interlude. In 7:2; 8:3; and 10:1 the reference is to another in the series of angels who carry out the judgments of God in the book. Most likely the use of “another angel” is to call the reader back to the seven angels who introduced the trumpet judgments, for these angels also introduce

divine judgment. This angel is “flying in midair” and speaks with “a loud voice,” similar to the eagle announcing the three woes in 8:13. This connects the message of this angel with those proclamations of judgment, and the “flying in midair” signifies an announcement made to the whole world.

This first proclamation of judgment, however, is significantly different from the others. This angel carries εὐαγγέλιον αἰώνιον (*euangelion aiōnion*, the eternal gospel), with the anarthrous form (of all the NT occurrences, only here and in Rom. 1:1 is it anarthrous) emphasizing the highly theological character of this “good news.” This is the only time εὐαγγέλιον appears in the Apocalypse, though the verb is found in 10:7 (“the mystery of God . . . announced to his servants the prophets”) as well as here. Moreover, the cognate εὐαγγελίσαι (*euangelisai*, to preach) gives “to preach the gospel” special force. But it is a very different gospel^[1] from the one found elsewhere in the NT, for it does not mention Jesus and his sacrifice for sin, nor is there the call for repentance as in 9:20, 21; 16:9, 11. Instead, the nations are called to “fear God and give him glory” in light of the coming judgment. Some (e.g., Mounce, Beale, Schnabel) believe there is no offer of salvation here but only a proclamation of judgment. This would fit the context of 8:13; 10:7; and 14:6–13 (judgment on the nations for what they have done to God’s people), and since the “gospel” is addressed to τοὺς καθημένους ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς (*tous kathēmenous epi tēs gēs*, those sitting on the earth), these are the “earth-dwellers” who chose Satan over God (11:10; 13:8, 14) and received the message of doom (8:13). Moreover, they are further described as “every nation, tribe, tongue, and people,” like those in 10:11; 11:9; and 13:7 who also follow the beast and participate in his evil deeds. Thus, it is indeed possible that this is forced homage rather than an offer of salvation.

It is more likely, however, that a final chance to repent is being given the nations. Everywhere that εὐαγγέλιον is found in the NT, it implies the gracious offer of salvation. Lohse (1960: 85) links this with the proclamation of the gospel in the end times in Mark 13:10 and parallels. Altink (1984: 187–89) believes that since the four key words of this passage also appear in David’s psalm of thanksgiving in 1 Chron. 16:8–36 (“fear” in 16:25, 30; “glory” in 16:24, 27, 28, 29; “judgment” in 16:12, 14; and “worship” in 16:29), this passage reflects the emphasis on God’s redemptive activity at the return of the ark of the covenant (193). In a later article, Altink (1986: 217) states that 14:6–7 reflects the covenant form of the OT, employing the covenant prologue (14:7), covenant stipulations (14:7, 8–9), witnesses (14:7–9), and blessings and curses (throughout chap. 14). While this latter scheme is somewhat artificial, he makes a strong case for the positive rather than negative force of this passage. Michaels (1997: 173) notes rightly the parallel with the summary of Jesus’ kingdom message in Mark 1:14–15, “The kingdom is near. Repent and believe the good news.” Also, in Rev. 5:9 and 7:9 the fourfold “nation, tribe, tongue, and people” is used for those who are converted from among the nations; and in 21:24, 26 the “nations” bring their “glory and honor” into the New Jerusalem. Aune (1998a: 825) calls this “an appeal for repentance and conversion to the God who created heaven and earth in the context of impending judgment.”

Three further points: (1) in 15:4 the victorious saints in heaven sing, “Who will not fear you, O Lord, and bring glory to your name?” an obvious reference to conversion (it is followed by “all nations will come and worship before you”); (2) in 16:9 the sinners “did not repent so as to give him glory,” thus defining repentance (unto salvation) as “giving God glory”; (3) in 19:5 God’s “slaves” are defined as “those who fear him,” and in 19:7 the great multitude sings, “Let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory.” It is clear that in Revelation “fear God and give him glory” are code words for repentance and conversion. Bauckham (1993b: 286–89) makes a good case for an allusion to Ps. 96:2b, “Proclaim [LXX εὐαγγελίζεσθε] his salvation from day to day,” especially since the next line

of the psalm says, “Declare his glory among the nations, his marvelous works among all peoples” (96:3). The context of the psalm fits the emphasis here quite well. Finally, that this is an “eternal gospel” emphasizes the everlasting nature of this message; it partakes of the eternal nature of God himself. Judgment refers to the events of chapters 19 and 20 and would hardly be called an “eternal gospel.” Thus, when the victorious saints in 15:4 celebrate that “all nations will come and worship before you,” they sing of the results of this offer of salvation. The decision as to whether this is a call to repentance or a proclamation of judgment is linked to two earlier questions: whether “repent” in 9:20, 21 and 16:9, 11 refers to God’s actual offer of repentance or simply to the depravity of the nations in refusing to repent and whether the people who are “terrified and give glory” to God in 11:13 are converted from among the nations. I find it unlikely that all of this material in the book would be used just to highlight the judgment theme. Moreover, when the persecutors in 16:9 refuse to “repent and give [God] glory,” it is quite likely that this means “repent and be converted.” So a true offer of salvation is far more probable. DeSilva (1998b: 789–94) calls this passage “the call to respond justly to the divine patron” and says that it forms a summons to honor God and his commandments, to give him the exclusive worship that is his due.

The message of the “eternal gospel” is delivered in a “loud voice” (also 14:9–11, 15, 18), so that all the inhabitants of earth can hear (14:6). The first two elements replicate the reaction of the survivors of the earthquake in 11:13, **Φοβήθητε τὸν θεὸν καὶ δότε αὐτῷ δόξαν** (*Phobēthēte ton theon kai dote autō doxan*, Fear God and give him glory). The call to “fear God” is frequent in the OT (Deut. 31:12; 1 Sam. 12:14, 24; Ps. 34:11; Prov. 1:7; Isa. 11:3), as is the command to “give him glory” (1 Chron. 16:24; Ps. 22:23; Isa. 24:15; 42:12). In effect, this sums up the OT and Jewish call to salvation. However, it is also a major NT emphasis; “fearing God” (2 Cor. 5:11; Phil. 2:12; 1 Pet. 1:17) and “giving him glory” (Luke 1:46; Rom. 15:6, 9; 1 Pet. 2:12) summarize the only proper response to God’s salvation. In Rev. 15:4 the triumphant saints praise God, singing, “Who will not fear you, O Lord, and bring glory to your name?” Thus, here this is a call to salvation, to repent and enter the realm of the holy.

The reason (**ὅτι**, *hoti*, because, for) for repenting is that **ἤλθεν ἡ ὥρα τῆς κρίσεως αὐτοῦ** (*ēlthen hē hōra tēs kriseōs autou*, the hour of his judgment has come). The aorist **ἤλθεν** is culminative, emphasizing that the time of judgment “has already arrived” (cf. 6:17 and 11:18 for similar uses of this verb), and this imminence is the basis of the final chance to repent, similar to Mark 1:15, “The kingdom of God has arrived; repent and believe the gospel.” The use of **ὥρα** for the divinely appointed “hour” parallels the theme in John, where it signifies Jesus’ “hour” of destiny (John 2:4; 7:30; 8:20). In Revelation the term often speaks of the final outpouring of judgment: 3:10 (“the hour of trial”); 9:15 (the angels “kept ready for this very hour”); 14:15 (“the hour to reap has come”); 18:10, 17, 19 (“in one hour your doom has come”). This echoes the similar use of “hour” in Daniel (see Beale 1999: 752), as in 4:17 LXX, the “time” of Nebuchadnezzar’s judgment, or 11:45 LXX, “the hour of his end will come.” Here we have the first of four uses of **κρίσις** in the book (14:7; 16:7; 18:10; 19:2), with two (16:7; 19:2) stressing the truth and justice of God’s judgments on the nations. In this context, the certainty and imminence of God’s judgment makes the call to repentance all the more critical—there will not be another opportunity, and there are only two choices, repent or face the final judgment.

The final element is a call to “worship” (**προσκυνήσατε**, *proskynēsate*) the God who “made the heaven and the earth and the sea and the springs of water.” In twenty-one of the other uses of this verb, “worship” refers not to forced submission but to homage and praise given to God (4:10; 5:14; 7:11; 9:20; 11:1, 16; 15:4; 19:4, 10 [twice]; 22:8, 9) or to the false trinity (13:4 [twice], 8, 12, 15; 14:9, 11;

16:2; 19:20). In 20:4 the two are brought together when the victorious saints are described as those who “had not worshiped the beast or his image.” It is clear that the nations are forced to make a choice: worship God and receive salvation or worship the beast (14:9, 11 below) and receive judgment. Kraft (1974: 193) calls the angel a heavenly herald calling the whole world to pay homage to the King. The description of God as “the one who made the heaven and the earth” occurs only here, but creation theology permeates the book (3:14; 4:7, 11; 5:13; 10:6; 12:16). The God who created and sustains this world will end it on the basis of his sovereign will. Moreover, the fourfold litany of “heaven, earth, sea, springs of water” as in 10:6 reiterates the victims of the first four trumpets (8:6–12) and bowls (16:2–9). As such these summarize the effects of God’s wrath and prove again that one of the purposes of the judgment septets is to prove the omnipotence of God, disprove the earthly gods, and give the nations a final chance to repent. This parallels the call of the early church to the pagan world to “turn from worthless things [idols] to the living God, who made heaven and earth and sea and everything in them” (Acts 14:15; cf. Acts 17:24–27; Rom. 1:19–20). An appeal to God’s creating the universe was an essential component of early Christian evangelistic preaching to Gentiles.

ii. Second Angel Predicting Destruction (14:8)

Although the destruction of the evil empire lies in the future, it is presented via the doublet ἘΠΕΣΕΝ ἘΠΕΣΕΝ (*Epesan, epesan*, Fallen, fallen), a proleptic aorist (see Porter 1994: 37) that stresses the absolute certainty of the coming destruction (cf. 10:7). That the second angel is said to “follow” the first emphasizes the connection between the two messages. In this sense 14:8 describes the “judgment” mentioned in 14:7. The language is taken from Isa. 21:9a, where Isaiah prophesied the destruction of Babylon via a messenger in a chariot who cries, “Babylon has fallen, has fallen.” There the prophecy of the doom of Babylon is followed by “all the images of its gods lie shattered on the ground” (21:9b). Thus, the judgment on the empire includes the destruction of its idols. This is certainly part of the message here as well, seen in the “wine of her adulteries” (below). “Babylon the Great” is taken from Dan. 4:30, the only place in the OT where this title occurs. There Nebuchadnezzar says, “Is not this the great Babylon I have built . . . by my mighty power and for the glory of my majesty?” At that moment the judgment of God fell upon him. In like fashion Rome, the Babylon of John’s day, was about to meet its maker due to its own hubris and high crimes. The use of the epithet “Babylon” for Rome was somewhat common (1 Pet. 5:13; 2 Bar. 11.1; 67.7; 79.1; Sib. Or. 5.143, 159; 2 Esdr. [4 Ezra] 3:2) because, like Babylon, Rome also conquered Israel and destroyed its temple as well as led the world into immorality. This is the first of six places the name “Babylon” occurs in Revelation (also 16:19; 17:5; 18:2, 10, 21, esp. 18:2, which reproduces “fallen, fallen is Babylon the Great”), though if we include “the great city” (11:8; 16:19; 17:18; 18:10, 16, 18, 19, 21),^[2] the number increases. Throughout the rest of the book, referring to Rome as “Babylon” suggests metaphorically that Rome’s fate will be the same as that of ancient Babylon (for OT prophecies on the destruction of Babylon, see Isa. 13:19–22; 14:20–23; Jer. 25:12–14; 50:35–40; 51:24–26).^[3]

The reason for the judgment soon to fall is that this final unholy Roman empire of the Antichrist ἐκ τοῦ οἴνου τοῦ θυμοῦ τῆς πορνείας αὐτῆς πεπότικεν πάντα τὰ ἔθνη (*ek tou oinou tou thymou tēs porneias autēs pepotiken panta ta ethnē*, made all the nations drink of the wine that leads to passion for her immorality). Of the fifteen times that ἔθνη occurs, “all” is found in five of them (Rev. 12:5; 14:8; 15:4; 18:3, 23). Here and in 18:3, 23 the phrase is used of the peoples of the world led astray by the immorality and idolatry of Rome. The imagery of “drinking from the wine of” refers to a

participation in a lifestyle or destiny. In Mark 10:38–39 Jesus speaks of the disciples “drinking the cup that I drink,” meaning experiencing his cup of suffering. Here the nations are “drinking the wine” of Rome’s immorality.

The three genitives that follow οἴνου are difficult to interpret. Some take τοῦ θυμοῦ as a descriptive genitive, “the maddening wine” (NIV, NEB, TEV, Sweet, Michaels) or with the following genitive, “passionate immorality” (BAGD 365; NLT). Another option is to take it as an epexegetical genitive, “the wine which is her immoral passion” (Aune 1998a: 831). Others interpret it in a resultative sense, “the wine that leads to [God’s] wrath” (NRSV, JB, Lohmeyer, Beale^[4]). A second interpretation of the resultative sense would see the “wrath” not as final judgment but as the process of human rage that is often the product of wine (A. Hanson 1957: 161–62; Caird), here reflected in the “wrath” of the nations as they persecute the saints (Krodel 1989: 268). In the Apocalypse there are two types of parallels, the “wine/cup of her immorality” (17:2, 4), and the cup of God’s wrath (14:10; 16:19; 19:15). Thus, there could well be double meaning here (Swete, Beckwith, Beasley-Murray, Thomas, Mounce). The first is supported by the obvious allusion to Jer. 51:7, “Babylon was a gold cup in the Lord’s hand; she made the whole earth drunk. The nations drank her wine; therefore, they have now gone mad.” The second is supported by the eight other uses^[5] of θυμός in the book, where it speaks of the “wrath” of either God (14:10, 19; 15:1, 7; 16:1, 19; 19:15) or the beast (12:12). Especially apt is 16:19, “God remembered Babylon the Great and gave her the cup filled with the wine of the fury of his wrath.” Therefore, divine wrath is implicit here and becomes explicit in τοῦ θυμοῦ τοῦ θεοῦ (tou thymou tou theou, the wrath of God) in 14:10. This blended sense of τοῦ θυμοῦ τῆς πορνείας αὐτῆς as the wine producing a “passion for her immorality”^[6] (probably the primary sense here) and as leading to the wrath of God for the depravity of Babylon (anticipating 14:10) is the best way to understand this difficult statement.

iii. Third Angel Pronouncing Judgment on Those Who Follow the Beast (14:9–11)

The message of the second angel emphasizing the judgment and its cause is now expanded in the condemnation by the third angel. There is a chiasm as this angel reverses the order, beginning with the reason for the judgment (14:9) and then specifying the judgment itself (14:10–11). In 13:15–17 the false prophet forces all to accept the mark of the beast on penalty of economic sanctions and then death. Here those who do accept that mark are promised a far greater penalty, eternal torment. The switch to present tenses (14:8 has an aorist and a perfect) stresses the continual “worship” of the beast and “reception” of his distinguishing mark. Thus, the guilt of the nations is firmly established.^[7] The demand that the nations make their decision to worship God (13:15 = 20:4 [“refuse to worship the beast”]; 14:7; 15:4; 19:4, 10) or the false trinity (13:4, 8, 12; 14:9, 11; 16:2; 19:20) along with the contrast between the punishments inflicted (loss of earthly life or eternal torment) provides one of the major themes of the last half of the book (see the excellent discussion of deSilva 1998b: 799–803).

The results of the premise (14:10) expand on the second angel’s proclamation of judgment in 14:8. Those who “drink” the θυμός of immorality in 14:8b will drink the cup of God’s θυμός in 14:10 (a further example of *lex talionis*, the law of retribution). While 14:9 is the protasis of the conditional statement, this is the apodosis: if anyone worships the beast instead of the Creator (14:7b), “then” (καί, kai) he or she will face “the wrath of God.” The switch from the present tenses of 14:9 to the future πίεται (pietai, will drink) here emphasizes the reality of the future judgment

(Wallace 1996: 568 calls this the “predictive future”).^[8] As in 14:8b we have several successive genitives in τοῦ οἴνου τοῦ θυμοῦ τοῦ θεοῦ (*tou oinou tou thymou tou theou*, the wine of the wrath of God). Most likely τοῦ θυμοῦ is an exegetical genitive, “the wine that is wrath,” in order to contrast it with the wine of immorality in 14:8b. Also, τοῦ θεοῦ may well be a subjective genitive picturing God exercising his wrath, which would fit the highly verbal elaboration of this “wrath” in 14:10b–11. Jewish writings often picture God’s wrath as a cup of wine that literally gets the guilty party “dead drunk.” This pictures God forcing his enemies to drink a full draft of his wrath, resulting in their getting drunk and then falling down “to rise no more” (Jer. 25:15–18, 27–28, esp. v. 27; see also Job 21:20; Ps. 60:3; 75:8; Isa. 51:17; Zech. 12:2).

It was common in the first century to mix water with wine at least by half (one part water to one part wine) or at times three-to-two or even three-to-one ratios in favor of the water (Aune 1998a: 833). To drink wine undiluted occurred only when one wished to get drunk. That is the picture here. God had “mixed” or “prepared” (κεκερασμένου, *kekerasmenou*) his wine “full strength” (the cognate ἀκράτου, *akratou*, lit., “unmixed”) to get them drunk on his wrath. Moreover, when they get drunk it will not dissipate as the effects of the wine wear off. When they fall down, they will never get up again! There is an *inclusio* as the undiluted “wine of his wrath” is poured into “the cup of his wrath.” Here, however, it is ὀργή (*orgē*, anger) rather than θυμός (the two are also found together in 16:19; 19:15). Some (e.g., Mounce 1998: 273 n. 18; Thomas 1995: 210) try to read into these the classical distinction whereby ὀργή refers to an external righteous indignation and θυμός to an intense internal anger. That distinction was not always observed in the Koine period, however, and in Revelation they are usually synonymous, as here. The purpose of combining the two words for anger is to intensify the concept of the wrath of God.

The wrath of God is now defined carefully as eternal torment. The enemies of God βασανισθήσεται ἐν πυρὶ καὶ θείῳ (*basanisthēsetai en pyri kai theō*, will be tormented with fire and sulfur). The idea of a fiery judgment is frequent in the book, especially in the imagery of the “lake of fire” (1:14; 2:18; 3:18; 4:5; 8:5–8; 14:18; 15:2; 16:8; 18:8; 19:12; 20:9, 14–15), with “sulfur” added to intensify the imagery in 9:17–18; 19:20; 20:10; 21:8. “Sulfur” or “brimstone” was a type of asphalt found particularly in volcanic deposits and produced both intense heat and terrible smell. It was an image used often in the Bible for terrible suffering under divine judgment (Gen. 19:24; Deut. 29:23; Job 18:15; Isa. 30:33; Ezek. 38:22). This is done at the judgment seat “in the presence of the holy angels and of the Lamb.” The imagery yields an incredible picture, as if the angels and Christ will be watching the torment for all eternity. Most likely this refers to the judicial proclamation of judgment that will lead to the eternal torment, but it goes beyond this to the carrying out of the sentence. In Luke 12:9 Jesus says, “He who disowns me before people will be disowned before the angels of God.” Both in Luke and here there is the Jewish idea of angels at the heavenly court participating not only in worship but also in judgment (Dan. 7:9–12; 1 Enoch 14.19–23; 40.1–10; 60.2–6). This also parallels the frequent theme in Jewish writings that the wicked in hell would be able to see the joy and glory of the righteous (1 Enoch 48.9; 108.14–15; 2 Esdr. [4 Ezra] 7:36–38; 2 Bar. 30.4; 51.5–6; Wis. 5:1–5), a punishment that would make their torment all the worse. Of course, the idea of the saints present at this judgment is not mentioned here, but the participation of the saints is emphasized in Rev. 2:27; 17:14; 20:4. It is difficult to know why the “holy angels” are mentioned before the Lamb. Beckwith (1919: 658) is probably correct in saying that the Lamb is placed last for emphasis, “as if the most poignant factor in the pain of the wicked would be the sight of the triumph of the Lamb, against whom as worshippers of the Beast they had made war.” In 3:5 Christ promises to “acknowledge [the overcomers] before [also ἐνώπιον, *enōpion*] my Father

and his angels.” This is the flip side of that, as the punishment of the wicked takes place “before the holy angels and the Lamb.”

The punishment in 14:11 is so severe that ὁ καπνὸς τοῦ βασανισμοῦ αὐτῶν εἰς αἰῶνας αἰώνων ἀναβαίνει (*ho kapnos tou basanismou autōn eis aiōnas aiōniōn anabainei*, the smoke of their torment is going to ascend forever and ever). This alludes to the prophecy of Edom’s destruction in Isa. 34:9–10, “Edom’s streams will be turned into pitch, her dust into burning sulfur . . . it will not be quenched night and day, its smoke will rise forever.” This picture is now applied to all the nations. “Smoke” is also mentioned alongside “fire and sulfur” in Rev. 9:17–18 and 18:9, 18, and at the same time refers to an incense offering in 8:4 and 15:8. Thus, there may well be a double meaning here: “smoke” as a sign of their torment and as a “sweet-smelling incense” to God (especially with the idea here of “ascending,” the very verb used in 8:4 for the incense “ascending” to God). Ἀναβαίνει, coming after the future “will be tormented,” is a prophetic present, “is going to ascend.” With the emphatic “forever and ever,” it makes the point absolutely clear that this terrible punishment will be their continual eternal destiny. This image is repeated in the acclamation of the great heavenly multitude in 19:3, “Hallelujah! The smoke from her goes up forever and ever.” At first glance, this idea of the eternal punishment of the unsaved as a sweet-smelling incense to God and a source of delight for the heavenly multitudes seems offensive. Yet we must remember the tone of the book. These are the ones who have killed the saints (6:9–11), worshiped the beast (13:4, 8, 12, 15; 14:9), and generally rejected the overtures of God’s calling for repentance (9:20–21; 14:6–7, 9–10). The judgment of God is not only deserved but mandated by the actions of the earth-dwellers. Moreover, this is the vindication of the saints promised in 6:11 and the answer to the imprecatory prayers of 6:9 and 8:3–4 (see Osborne 1993).

The rest of the verse repeats the major emphases of 14:9–11. First, we learn that those who have stood against God οὐκ ἔχουσιν ἀνάπαυσιν ἡμέρας καὶ νυκτός (*ouk echousin anapausin hēmeras kai nyktos*, have no rest day and night). The temporal genitive ἡμέρας καὶ νυκτός stresses the time within which the action occurs (see 7:15) and parallels the idea of “eternal” damnation in the previous verse. This occurs in Isa. 34:9–10 (discussed in the last verse), “burning sulfur . . . not quenched night and day . . . forever.” There is a parallel between the “day and night” punishment of the unrepentant nations here and the “day and night forever” torment of the false trinity in the lake of fire in 20:10. At the same time, there is a deliberate contrast between this and the “day and night” worship of the four living creatures in 4:8[9] and the “day and night” service of the triumphant saints before the throne in 7:15. Then the twofold description of the unredeemed as “worshiping the beast and his image” and “receiving the mark of his name” repeats the description of 14:9. This causes another chiasm, as the order in 14:9–10 is reason for judgment followed by description of judgment, and in 14:11 it is description of judgment followed by reason for judgment. To summarize the two chiasms of 14:8–11 (with A = description and B = reason), it is AB (v. 8) : BA (vv. 9–10) : AB (v. 11).

iv. Ethical Conclusion—Call for Endurance (14:12–13)

There are close parallels with three previous passages. As in 13:10b (“this demands endurance and faithfulness on the part of the saints”), John pauses to call his readers to endurance. As in 12:17, they are called to “keep the commandments of God.” Also, the introductory particle (ὥδε, *hōde*, this demands) recapitulates 13:18 (“this demands wisdom”). Some (Krodel 1989: 270; Beale 1999: 766) overstate the case when they call this the “literary focus” of the section. Rather, it contextualizes the judgment oracle of 14:8–11 for the readers. “In light of” (also connoted in ὥδε;

see on 13:18) the judgment to come, the saints must persevere. Ὑπομονή (*hypomonē*, endurance) is the key ethical term in the Apocalypse. This is the last of seven occurrences (1:9; 2:2, 3, 19; 3:10; 13:10; 14:12) and calls the believers both to wait on the Lord and to overcome evil (see on 1:9).

The rest of the verse in a sense defines “endurance,” noting two aspects. First, the Christian must be among οἱ τηροῦντες τὰς ἐντολὰς τοῦ θεοῦ (*hoi tērountes tas entolas tou theou*, those who keep the commandments of God), the same wording as in 12:17 (concluding the section on the war of the dragon against the church). Τηρέω is another major term for “perseverance” in this book, occurring ten times (1:3; 2:26; 3:3, 8, 10; 12:17; 14:12; 16:15; 22:7, 9). On every occasion it means to “follow” and “obey” God’s commands, to “guard” the truths of God in a world that has chosen darkness over light. Here it governs two ideas, obeying “God’s commands” and maintaining “faith in Jesus.” In the first instance, ἐντολὰς is found only in 12:17 and 14:12, and in both places refers to the commands of God found in his Word, especially in terms of its ethical requirements.

The second phrase, τὴν πίστιν Ἰησοῦ (*tēn pistin Iēsou*, faith in Jesus), is debated, both in terms of the meaning of πίστις and the force of the genitive Ἰησοῦ. “Faith” occurs elsewhere (2:13, 19; 13:10) and is the counterpart to the adjective πιστός (1:5; 2:10, 13; 3:14; 17:14; 19:11; 21:5; 22:6). Beale (1999: 766) believes it refers to the doctrinal content of “the Christian faith” (as in Jude 3; cf. Eph. 4:13). This is possible but does not fit the context. For one thing, “not denying the faith” in 2:13 does not refer so much to denying theological assertions as to denying one’s allegiance to Christ. Aune (1998a: 838) is closer to the meaning when he points out that πίστιν τηρεῖν (*pistin tērein*, to keep faith) was a common Greek expression for maintaining loyalty or allegiance. Here Ἰησοῦ is an objective genitive (so also Swete 1911: 186; Beckwith 1919: 659), and thus the phrase demands that the saints remain firmly “faithful to Jesus.”

Many of those who persevere will perish for their faithfulness to Christ. Thus John hears “a voice from heaven” giving reassurance (14:13). Such an unidentified heavenly voice was heard in 10:4, 8 commanding John to seal up (“do not write”) the message of the seven thunders and also in 11:12 calling the two witnesses to heaven after their resurrection. The point is that the message comes straight from God, and the absence of an angelic intermediary makes this direct exhortation all the more clear. The command to “write” (γράψον, *grapson*) the message also occurs in 1:11, 19; 19:9 (another beatitude); 21:5, and is also used to begin each of the seven letters (2:1, 8, 12, 18; 3:1, 7, 14). This is the second of seven beatitudes in the book (1:3; 14:13; 16:15; 19:9; 20:6; 22:7, 14), and μακάριοι (*makarioi*, blessed) refers to the divine blessings to be experienced by the faithful.

At one level this blessing refers to martyrs. Martyrdom is stressed (6:9–11; 7:14; 12:11; 13:7, 15; 16:6; 17:6; 18:24; 20:4; 22:14) and forms one of the important themes of the book. Like the theme of *imitatio Christi* in the Gospels, to follow Jesus involves a willingness to die (Mark 8:34 par.). As throughout church history “the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church,” so it will be at the final period of history. Throughout the Apocalypse, martyrdom is a victory, a conquering of Satan by participating in “the fellowship of Jesus’ suffering” (Phil. 3:10; see Rev. 6:11; 7:14; 12:11; 20:4). At the same time, this blessing cannot be restricted to the martyrs (contra Caird, Bauckham, Aune, Michaels) but encompasses all οἱ νεκροὶ οἱ ἐν κυρίῳ ἀποθνήσκοντες (*hoi nekroi hoi en kyriō apothnēskontes*, the dead who die in the Lord). For the earth-dwellers, to live in this world and follow the beast will end in eternal punishment; but for the heaven-dwellers, to die in this world and follow the Lord will end in eternal bliss. To “die in the Lord” means to remain faithful to the very end, to make Christ the sphere (ἐν+ dative of sphere) of your life. The added ἀπ’ ἄρτι^[10] (*ap’ arti*, from now on) means that this teaching refers not just to the final period of history but to all the saints who die while remaining true to Christ from John’s time to the end of history. Yet it also

signifies that the period of testing was starting, and the church must be ready for what was going to happen “from now on.”^[11] They would be tested by persecution and must “right now” determine to remain faithful (14:12).

Incredibly, the “Spirit” now adds a comment solidifying the exhortation and promise to remain true to Christ. Elsewhere the “Spirit” is seen as the revelatory source behind the seven letters (2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22) and prophetic activity (19:10) and the one breathing life into the two witnesses (11:11) and bringing the visions to John (1:10; 4:2; 17:3; 21:10). Only here and in 22:17 (“The Spirit and the bride say, ‘Come!’”) does the Spirit actually speak in the book. Thus, it is all the more important that the reader heed these words, for they begin with a direct “voice from heaven” and conclude with a message from the Holy Spirit. The Spirit’s **ναί** (*nai*, yes) is functionally equivalent to **ἀμήν** (*amēn*, amen) in 1:7 and 22:20 (so Aune 1998a: 839) and means the Spirit is affirming the truth of the special blessings awaiting those who “die in the Lord.”

The **ἵνα** (*hina*, that) introduces a content clause that spells out the “blessing” itself (Porter 1994: 238–39). Those who die in the Lord **ἀναπαήσονται ἐκ τῶν κόπων αὐτῶν** (*anapaēsontai ek tōn kopōn autōn*, will rest from their labors). The idea of “resting” in the Lord contrasts greatly with the torment of the unbelievers, who have “no rest day and night” (14:11). It also parallels the promise of vindication to the martyrs in 6:11, where they are given white robes and told to “rest awhile” until the full number of martyrs is completed and the end should come. This “rest” is the final rest in eternity for which the temporary “rest” of 6:11 prepared. An interesting parallel occurs in the “rest theology” of Heb. 4:1–11, where the Sabbath rest of God is promised to those who “do not harden their hearts.” Those who “enter God’s rest” **κατέπαυσεν ἀπὸ τῶν ἔργων αὐτοῦ** (*katepausen apo tōn ergōn autou*, rests from his own work, 4:10, language similar to this message). Here the **κόπων** are the “labors” on behalf of Christ, the faithful witness, and perseverance under persecution that typify the true people of God “from now on.” The church at Ephesus was commended for its “labor (**τὸν κόπον**) and perseverance” because it had not “grown weary” (**κεκοπίακες**, *kekopiakes*, a cognate of the noun here). Those who “die in the Lord” are promised that their labor will be finished and their eternal rest in God will have begun.

Moreover, they will be rewarded for all they have sacrificed and accomplished. **Γάρ** (*gar*, for) in this context is probably more explanatory than causal, that is, explaining what the reward will be rather than providing a reason for it (see Zerwick 1963: §473).^[12] They are promised that **τὰ ἔργα αὐτῶν ἀκολουθεῖ μετ’ αὐτῶν** (*ta erga autōn akolouthei met’ autōn*, their deeds are going to follow^[13] after them). Here **ἔργα** is virtually synonymous with **κόπων** and means that all the hard work, not only their good deeds but also their faithfulness under persecution, will be recompensed by God. The idea of being “judged according to your deeds” occurs often in Scripture (2 Chron. 6:23; Job 34:11; Ps. 62:12; Eccles. 8:14; Prov. 24:12; Jer. 17:10; Ezek. 18:20; Hos. 12:2; Matt. 16:27; Rom. 2:6; 14:12; 1 Cor. 3:12–15; 2 Cor. 5:10; 11:15; 2 Tim. 4:14; 1 Pet. 1:17) and Jewish literature (1 Enoch 41.1–2; 2 Esdr. [4 Ezra] 7:35; 8:33; 2 Bar. 14.12); and in the Apocalypse, it applies to both unbelievers (18:6; 20:13) and believers (2:23; 14:13; 20:12; 22:12). It is the basic Roman and biblical principle of *lex talionis*, the law of retribution. What we do for or against God is what we will receive from God. Therefore, the unbelievers will receive eternal torment for their evil deeds (14:9–11), and the faithful will receive eternal rewards. As they “follow the Lamb” (14:4), their deeds will “follow after” them.

Summary and Contextualization

The three angel-heralds (14:6–13) provide the basic contrast in the book between the fate of those who repent and those who refuse to do so. The scene of the angel flying in midair (14:6–7) is the centerpiece of the mission theme in the book. While the beast and his followers are hounding, persecuting, and killing the saints, the saints will neither be hiding in caves nor taking up arms in a counterrebellion (see 13:10) but will be engaged in prophetic witness alongside the two witnesses of 11:3–6. There will be an active mission taking place, and some will be saved during that time (11:13), although the majority will completely reject this final opportunity to repent (9:20–21; 16:9, 11). This is the universal mission to “every nation, tribe, language, and people” that is central to the Gospels and Acts and is connected to Jesus’ statement that “the gospel must be preached to all nations” in the Olivet discourse (Mark 13:10 par. Matt. 24:14). The call to “fear God and give him glory” is the natural result of the judgment septets, inasmuch as they proved the powerlessness of the earthly gods (as did the Egyptian plagues on which they were modeled) and showed that glory belongs to Yahweh alone. Thus, this is a real offer from God, a final call for repentance to the earth-dwellers, their last chance to avoid the “hour of judgment” that “has arrived.” Unless they respond, all that awaits them is the horrors of 14:8–20. The God who created the universe is sovereign, and the first four of the trumpet and bowl judgments (8:7–12; 16:2–9) have shown God’s power over “the heavens, the earth, the sea, and the springs of water.” Thus, even they were in part a call to repentance (as seen in 16:9) and proof that the Creator alone is sovereign.

The second and third angels tell us that the judgment of those who reject this offer and refuse to repent is far more terrible than the judgment septets. First, the evil empire of the beast, Babylon the Great, is doomed, and her seduction of the nations has brought about the wrath of God (14:8a). Second, the followers who accepted the beast’s image and drank his “wine of wrath” (14:8b–9) will now drink the far greater “wine of wrath” that God will pour out “full strength” (14:10). The beast’s wrath is finite, but God’s wrath will be complete and eternal. The sinners who have tasted the fleeting pleasures of this world will now taste the eternal “burning sulfur” and “smoke of torment” that is the result of their folly (14:11).

Still, in the midst of this terrible picture of judgment, Christ in his divine compassion utters one more warning to the members of the seven churches (and to us). Since only the “faithful” who “obey God’s commandments” will avoid this judgment, Christ calls for “endurance” on the part of “the saints” (14:12). Throughout the book, believers are frequently called to be “overcomers” who conquer temptation and remain faithful to Christ in the midst of all the pressure and persecution. They may have to pay the final penalty of martyrdom, but they are promised in 14:13 that eternal blessings will result, for they will not only find “rest from their labors,” but also their “deeds” will “follow after them.” Their faithful deeds in remaining true to Christ and bearing active witness will become their eternal rewards (see also 1 Pet. 2:11–12). When believers are “judged according to their works” (2:23; 14:13; 20:12; 22:12), their good deeds will follow them into the next life.

Additional Notes

14:6. Some manuscripts (□⁴⁷ 046 *□ Byz et al.) omit ἄλλον, probably because the first three letters are similar to the first three letters of ἄγγελον, and copyists skipped over the word. It is present in □^c A C P 051 et al. and is the more likely reading.

14:8. ἄλλος ἄγγελος δεύτερος; The full reading is found in □^c [C δεύτερον] P 051 1611 2053 et al., while A 046 and many minuscules

have all three terms in a different order. However, some excellent manuscripts omit ἄγγελος (□⁴⁷ 2040 1854 1841 1006 *² et al.), probably due to the similarity between the first three letters of each (see also 14:6); and others omit δεύτερος (61 69 296 598 2039 TR et al.), possibly because it seems redundant after ἄλλος. The wording found in the text (ἄλλος ἄγγελος δεύτερος) fits the similar wording of verse 9 (ἄλλος ἄγγελος τρίτος) as well as John’s style elsewhere (6:4; 10:1; 15:1; see Metzger 1994: 678; Beale; Aune) and is the more likely.

14:11. ὁ καπνὸς τοῦ βασανισμοῦ αὐτῶν εἰς αἰῶνας αἰώνων ἀναβαίνει: Since 14:10–11 provide the first of many descriptions of eternal punishment in the book, this is a good place to discuss the issue of annihilationism. Many scholars today (P. Hughes; Pinnock; Boismard 1996: 72) believe that unbelievers will not suffer conscious eternal punishment but rather the eternal consequences of being “annihilated,” that is, they will cease to exist. Adherents argue that the imagery of Gehenna in the Gospels and of the “eternal smoke ascending” here are metaphors for the eternal results of annihilation rather than literal depictions of conscious eternal torment. Some passages seem to describe earthly punishment in eternal terms, such as Isa. 13:20 (Babylon “never inhabited” again); Isa. 34:9–10 (Edom’s destruction described as “her smoke will rise forever”); 2 Pet. 3:7 (the “destruction of ungodly men”); Jude 7 (Sodom and Gomorrah as examples “of those who suffer the punishment of eternal fire”). However, the repeated emphasis on eternal conscious torment in Jesus’ teaching (Mark 9:48; Matt. 3:12; 18:8; 25:41, 46; cf. the Gehenna imagery in Matt. 5:22, 29–30; 10:28; 18:9; 23:15, 33 par.) and in Revelation makes it unlikely that it is merely a metaphor for ceasing to exist. Indeed, what is eternal torment to the Western mind (ceasing to exist) is nirvana to the Eastern mind. Beale (1999: 762) gives two reasons for taking this as “ongoing punishment”: first, in 20:10 the false trinity suffers divine judgment in the lake of fire, “where they are tormented day and night forever and ever,” with no hint whatsoever that they simply die, and it is obvious in 20:13–15 that the ungodly suffer the same fate. Second, the term βασανισμός is never used in Scripture of annihilation, and in Revelation it always depicts conscious suffering (9:5; 11:10; 12:2; 18:7, 10, 15; 20:10). Thus, the view that “eternal torment” here means the cessation of existence is highly unlikely.

14:13. Ναί is omitted in □⁴⁷ 628 620 582 336 *² et al. and could be said to be more original since it is the shorter reading. However, there is also excellent support for the longer reading (ⲓ^c A C P051 10061611 1854 et al.), which makes good sense in this context.

d. Harvest of the Earth (14:14–20)

The judgment alluded to in 14:8, 10–11 is now spelled out in even more lurid detail using the imagery of a harvest of judgment as seen in Joel 3:13, “Swing the sickle, for the harvest is ripe. Come, trample the grapes, for the winepress is full and the vats overflow—so great is their wickedness” (see also Isa. 17:5; Jer. 25:30; Hos. 6:11). There are two sections here, the grain harvest (14:14–16) and the grape harvest (14:17–20). Yet there is debate as to whether these are two synonymous images for the judgment of the wicked (Hendriksen; Morris; Beagley; Roloff; Fekkes 1994: 193; Michaels; Giesen; Aune; Beale) or whether the first harvest is of the faithful and the second of the sinner (Swete, Lohmeyer, Farrer, Ford, Prigent, Krodel, Bauckham 1993b: 290–96).[1] I prefer the latter view and will present arguments below on 14:14–16. This section parallels the parable of the wheat and the weeds in Matt. 13:24–30, where the harvesters gather the weeds for burning and the wheat to be placed in the heavenly “barn.”

- i. Grain harvest (14:14–16)
- ii. Grape harvest (14:17–20)

Exegesis and Exposition

¹⁴I looked, and behold there was a white cloud, and the one who was sitting on the cloud was like a son of man, having a gold crown on his head and a sharp sickle in his hand. ¹⁵And another angel came out of the temple, crying in a loud voice to the one who was sitting on the cloud, “Take your sickle and reap, because the time to harvest has come, for the harvest of the earth is ripe.” ¹⁶So the one who was sitting on the cloud cast his sickle on the earth and harvested it.

¹⁷Another angel came from the temple in heaven, and he also had a sharp sickle. ¹⁸Then another angel came from the altar. He had authority over the fire, and he called with a loud voice to the one who had the sharp sickle, saying, “Take your sharp sickle and gather the grapes of the vine, namely the earth, because its grapes are ripe. ¹⁹So the angel cast his sickle to the earth and gathered the vine, that is, the earth. He threw them into the great winepress of the wrath of God. ²⁰And they were trampled in the winepress outside the city. Blood flowed out of the winepress as high as a horse’s bridle for a distance of 1,600 stadia.

i. Grain Harvest (14:14–16)

The customary introduction Καὶ εἶδον, καὶ ἰδοῦ (*Kai eidon, kai idou*, I looked, and behold; 6:2, 5, 8; 14:1) marks a separate section of the vision. There is considerable debate as to whether ἐπὶ τὴν νεφέλην καθήμενον ὅμοιον υἱὸν ἀνθρώπου (*epi tēn nephelēn kathēmenon homoion huion anthrōpou*, the one who was sitting on the cloud was like a son of man)[2] is Jesus (R. Charles; Schaik 1980: 222–25; Johnson; Chilton; Giesen; Mounce; Beale) or an angel (Kiddle, Michaels, Aune). The primary arguments for taking this as an angel are in the context. This verse leads into 14:15, where the next figure is called “another angel” (perhaps implying that the “one like a son of man” here is an angel), and that “second” angel then commands the first to harvest the earth. However, this is obviously another allusion to the “one like a son of man” in Dan. 7:13 who “comes with the clouds of heaven.” The only other places in the book that echo Dan. 7:13 allude clearly to Christ as the Son of Man (Rev. 1:7, 13). Moreover, “another angel” in 14:15 borrows the phrase from 14:6, 8–9, and this practice continues in 14:17–18. This is a literary ploy that binds together 14:6–20 and does not mean that John considers the figure of 14:14 to be an angel. Moreover, since the angel of 14:15 brings a command from the temple/God, it is not problematic for him to order Jesus to harvest the

earth.

This Son of Man has three characteristics. First, he is on **νεῖλη λευκή**. In Dan. 7:13 he “comes with the clouds of heaven,” and three times here he is seen “on a cloud” (14:14, 15, 16), so it is strongly emphasized. Yet 14:14 is the only mention in the book of a “white cloud.” Throughout the Apocalypse, the color “white” signifies purity (as in the “white robe” of 6:11; 7:9, 13), wisdom (the “white hair” of the “one like a son of man” in 1:14), glory (the “white throne” of 4:4), and victory (the “white horse” on which Christ and the heavenly army come in 19:11, 14; the “white garments” they wear in 19:14). The white cloud here is not so much a means of transport as it is a kind of throne that he **καθήμενος ἐπὶ** (*kathēmenos epì*, sits on; stressed in 14:14–16). This may echo Joel 3:12, “There I will sit to judge all the nations on every side” (Joel 3:12–13 is behind this whole section). The question here is whether the white cloud signifies judgment (the cloud in 1:7) or salvation (the cloud in 10:1; 11:12). The emphasis on the “white cloud” could favor either (the white of purity or the white of victory). The theme of judgment even affects the saints, however, for they will also stand before the bema or judgment seat in 20:12 (see on that verse); and it is judgment that dominates this section, as seen in that Christ “sits on” this cloud. Thus, the “white cloud” signifies the glorious victory of Christ as he prepares to harvest the earth.^[3]

Second, he has^[4] **στέφανον χρυσοῦν** (*stephanon chrysoun*, a gold crown) on his head. The only other “gold crowns” in the book are worn by the twenty-four celestial elders in 4:4 and by the demonic locusts in 9:7. The **στέφανος** was both a victory wreath in the games and a sign of sovereignty for a ruler (see Kraft, *EDNT* 3:274). In Revelation it is sovereignty that is emphasized. Stevenson (1995: 272) says this echoes Dan. 7:13, and the gold wreath connotes royal authority and divine glory. Caesar himself normally avoided the **διάδημα** (*diadēma*, ruler’s crown; cf. 12:3; 19:12) with its formal symbol of royalty and preferred to wear a wreath (usually laurel) to signify peace and victory (Stevenson 1995: 260). The “one like a son of man” is a sovereign about to judge his world.

Finally, this sovereign judge has **δρέπανον ὀξύ** (*drepanon oxy*, a sharp sickle) in his hand. Both in the parable of the growing seed in Mark 4:29 and seven times in Rev. 14:14–19, the sickle stands for the judgment of God in the final harvest. The emphasis on the “sharpness” of the sickle brings out the finality and power behind the judgment.

Now “another angel” (14:15; see 14:6, 8–9) comes **ἐκ τοῦ ναοῦ** (*ek tou naou*, from the temple; also in 14:17; 15:5–6), the heavenly temple (7:15; 11:19; 15:5–8; 16:1, 17), where apparently God has his throne (in 7:15 God’s throne is in the temple). In 11:19 (the storm theophany coming from the temple); 15:5–8 (the angels with the seven last plagues coming out of the temple); and 16:1, 17 (the command to pour the bowls), the temple is linked with the judgment of God. That is the case here and in 14:17, where the two harvests are directed from the heavenly temple. God’s holiness demands justice as well as mercy (the temple in 7:15). As I argue below, the judgment in 14:14–16 is of believers and thus centers on mercy, while in 14:17–20 it is of unbelievers and centers on justice.

The loud voice of the angelic herald parallels 14:7, 9, 18 and stresses the importance of the message. Christ is told, **Πέμψον τὸ δρέπανόν σου καὶ θέρισον** (*Pempson to drepanon sou kai therison*, Take your sickle and reap), with the aorist imperatives in this context ingressive, “begin to harvest.” The reason (**ὅτι**, *hoti*, because) is that “the time to harvest has come.” This alludes to Joel 3:13a, “Swing the sickle, for the harvest is ripe.” There it is the nations who have persecuted God’s people and are promised judgment. Yet the second half of Joel 3:13 (trampling the grapes) is echoed only in Rev. 14:17–20, and here the harvest is positive. Bauckham (1993b: 291–96) states that the harvest imagery likely goes back to 14:4 and picks up the idea of the 144,000 as “firstfruits” of

the great harvest to come. That final “ripe harvest” of the saints occurs here in 14:14–16 (see further the additional note). This is also shown in the second ὅτι clause, “because the harvest of the earth is ripe.”^[5] What is significant is that in 14:14–16 this harvest is not followed by a description such as that in John 15:6, where the branches are “picked up, thrown into the fire, and burned.” Nor is there any imagery of threshing the grain (trampling it, as in Jer. 51:33; Hab. 3:12; and burning it, as in Matt. 3:12; Luke 3:17) or winnowing it (throwing it into the air to separate the good grain from the chaff, as in Ps. 1:4; 35:5; Isa. 17:13; cf. Matt. 3:12; Luke 3:17). There is no hint of final destruction like that which follows the grape harvest in 14:19b–20. Therefore, it is likely that 14:15 describes the harvest of the redeemed and 14:17–20 of the unsaved.^[6] In Matt. 9:37–38 Jesus calls the harvest of souls “plentiful” and tells the disciples to ask “the Lord of the harvest” for more workers (see also Luke 10:2). In John 4:34–38 Jesus speaks of the fields as “ripe for harvest” and calls on the disciples to “harvest the crop for eternal life.” This is the parallel for the grain harvest here.

Christ is described again in 14:16 as “the one who was sitting on the cloud” (cf. 14:14–15), making his authority even more emphatic by the repetition. He obeys the command and ἔβαλεν (*ebalen*, cast—another proleptic aorist [see n. 5]) his sickle to harvest the earth. The idea of “throwing” his sickle to the earth is a strong metaphor and pictures a decisive act. Normally, ἀποστέλλω (*apostellō*) is used with δρέπανον, meaning “put in the sickle” (BAGD 99; or πέμπω as in 14:15, 18), so this image of “casting the sickle” to the earth is particularly apt in light of the context of final judgment. The picture of Jesus “casting” the sickle to harvest the righteous here and an angel “casting” the sickle to harvest the wicked in 14:19 parallels the great white throne judgment of the saints in 20:12 and of the sinners in 20:13–14.

ii. Grape Harvest (14:17–20)

The ἄλλος ἄγγελος (*allos angelos*, other angel) of 14:17 does not have a “gold crown,” separating him from the “one like a son of man” in 14:14, and he comes “from the temple,” linking him not with Christ but with the angel of 14:15 who also “comes out of the temple.” He does not come with inherent authority like Christ but rather with derived authority; since he comes “from the temple,” he has authority from God. He does have a “sickle,” however, and so the second harvest begins.

Still “another angel” appears in 14:18, but this one comes ἐκ τοῦ θυσιαστηρίου (*ek tou thysiastēriou*, from the altar) instead of the temple. As stated in 6:9 and 8:3, the “altar” in the Apocalypse combines the images of the altar of burnt offering and the altar of incense. Here it may especially be connected with the prayers of the saints for vengeance in both those contexts. In other words, the prayers have reached God, and he is sending his angel to initiate once again (see on 8:3–5) his response in sending judgment on the oppressors. However, this angel not only comes from the altar but also has ἐξουσίαν ἐπὶ τοῦ πυρός (*exousian epitou pyros*, authority over the fire). The πῦρ here is almost certainly symbolic of fiery judgment, as in the “fire and sulfur” (πυρὶ καὶ θείῳ, *pyri kai theō*) of 14:10. Fire as a symbol of final judgment is frequent in the NT. But where does the idea of an angel having “authority over the fire” come from? As several have noted (R. Charles, Lohmeyer, Aune), Jewish tradition often talked of angels whom God had placed in charge of the elements like wind, water, earth, and fire (1 Enoch 60.11–21; Jub. 2.2). Testament of Abraham 12.14 and 13.10 names “Purouel” the archangel over fire. Here we may also have an allusion to Rev. 8:3–5, where after the prayers of the saints ascend to God, the angel fills the censer with fire and hurls it to the earth, inaugurating the trumpet judgments. This suggests that the angel here in Rev. 14 also

has charge over the fiery judgment of God on the unbelieving nations and, as in Rev. 8, inaugurates this judgment in answer to the prayers of the saints for vengeance and justice.

Like the one in 14:15, this angel calls “with a loud voice” and commands the first angel to “take your sharp sickle” and harvest. But now the image is of the grape harvest, so the command is to *τρύγησον* (*trygēson*, gather) the grapes from *τῆς ἀμπέλου τῆς γῆς* (*tēs ampelou tēs gēs*, the vine, namely, the earth). *Γῆ* occurs five times in 14:15–19 to emphasize the nature of this judgment “on the earth.” There is a good possibility that *τῆς γῆς* is an epexegetical genitive, “the vine, that is, the earth,” thus bringing out even more explicitly this point. Now the second half of Joel 3:13 (“Come, trample the grapes, for the winepress is full and the vats overflow—so great is their wickedness”) comes into play. The use of the grape harvest as a metaphor for divine judgment is also seen in Isa. 5:5; 63:2–3, 6; Lam. 1:15.

Thus, in response to the command, the angel reproduces Christ’s action (Rev. 14:16) and “casts his sickle to the earth” in a violent motion in order to “gather the vine, that is, the earth” (14:19, the same wording as 14:18). As in 12:7–9, the angels can be warriors who carry out God’s judgment. At the parousia in 19:11–20, the judgment of the nations is carried out entirely by the King of kings and Lord of lords. Angels are apparently not present there (though they could be part of the “armies of heaven” who follow in 14:14). Here, however, angels are an essential part of the outpouring of the wrath of God, appearing four times in 14:14–20. The text here does parallel John 15:6, as the avenging angel (possibly responding to the cries for vengeance in 6:9ff.; 8:3ff.) cuts down the vine and casts it into the great winepress of God.

Another solecism or grammatical anomaly is that the masculine *τὸν μέγαν* (*ton megan*, the great) does not agree with the feminine *τὴν ληνὸν* (*tēn lēnon*, winepress). There have been many attempts to explain it,^[7] such as a simple error (Swete 1911: 192) or attraction to the masculine *τοῦ θυμοῦ* (*tou thymou*, the wrath) to emphasize “the wrath of God” that is symbolized in the winepress (Beckwith, Kiddle, Mounce). Interestingly, *ληνός* can be masculine (Gen. 30:38, 41 LXX) as well as feminine, though it is obviously feminine here. Perhaps *τὸν μέγαν* is in apposition with “winepress,” with the lack of concord highlighting the greatness of the judgment (suggested as a possibility by Beale 1999: 779). This solution is probably the best. The “great winepress of the wrath of God” echoes Isa. 63:2–3, “I have trodden the winepress alone; . . . I trampled them in my anger and trod them down in my wrath; their blood splattered my garments, and I stained all my clothing. For the day of vengeance was in my heart, and the year of my redemption has come.” Fekkes (1994: 195–96) argues that John here combines Isa. 63:3 with Joel 3:13, presenting divine judgment as a holy war, looking forward to its finalization in Rev. 19:13, 15. The winepress consisted of two vats, an upper one in which the grapes were pressed (usually trampled by foot, the image here) and a lower one in which the juice was collected. As Bornkamm (TDNT 4:254) brings out, the wine harvest was a joyous feast, and that is the atmosphere here and in the OT passages above. Divine judgment is also vindication and redemption for the people of God, and their enemies are getting justice. It is hard to imagine a stronger picture of final judgment than the graphic image of blood rising like juice from grapes trodden in a winepress.

It is not clear whether *ἐπατήθη* (*epatēthē*, was trampled) in 14:20 means the angel executed the judgment or God did. The presence of the angel casting the sickle to the earth could mean that it is the angel (so Schüssler Fiorenza 1991: 91; Michaels 1997: 178). However, the frequent use of the divine passive in the Apocalypse (e.g., “was given”; see on 6:2, 4, 8) plus 19:15, in which Christ “treads the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God,” favors God/Christ as the actual judge here. The judgment occurs *ἔξωθεν τῆς πόλεως* (*exōthen tēs poleōs*, outside the city). The “city” is not

identified, and it is possible it could be Babylon/Rome. If so, those “outside” would be believers who are martyred for their faith. However, this hardly fits the context of divine judgment on the nations. It is likely that the article is anaphoric, pointing to the “great city” of 11:8 (the last time the term was used), Jerusalem (Lohmeyer 1926: 126; Aune 1998a: 847). Jewish tradition stated that the enemies of God and his people would be destroyed in the vicinity of Jerusalem (Joel 3:2, 12; Zech. 14:4–5; 2 Esdr. [4 Ezra] 13:33–38; 2 Bar. 40.1–2). However, Heb. 13:12 says that Jesus “suffered outside the city gate,” so some (e.g., Mounce 1998: 281) see here a reference to Christ. This is unlikely. Instead, the same theology works in two different ways. To be executed “outside the gate” is to be cut off from the covenant people. In Heb. 13:12 Jesus sacrificed himself by bearing our sins “outside the gate,” while here the nations are judged “outside” the holy city. This emphasis occurs also in Rev. 22:14–15, where the faithful “go through the gates into the city” while sinners must remain “outside.” Also, in 3:12 the “overcomers” will “never go outside” the “temple of God” again, anticipating the final holy city of 21:9–27. Thus, the judgment of unbelievers “outside the city” emphasizes their absolute rejection by God and is in contrast with the blessed state of the faithful.

As Christ tramples the grapes of wrath, an incredible outpouring of blood ensues. It flows out of the vat of God’s winepress and “rises as high as a horse’s bridle.” In 1 Enoch 100.3 the final eschatological war will be so terrible that “the horse will walk through the blood of sinners up to his chest; and the chariot shall sink down up to its top” (cf. 2 Esdr. [4 Ezra] 15:35–36). The same picture of terrible carnage occurs in Rev. 19:17–18, 21b, where the carrion birds are invited to “the great supper of God” and feast on the flesh of the dead armies that dared to oppose God. Bauckham (1993b: 40–48) studies the apocalyptic tradition behind this (finding blood combined with horses also in *Ginza*; y. *Ta’an.* 4.8; Lam. Rab. 2.2.4; b. *Git.* 57a, and seven other places) and calls this “a topos which was widely used to indicate slaughter, in war, of exceptional proportions” (43). Since only 1 Enoch predates Revelation, the topos developed partly because of the Revelation text, but he rightly surmises that there was probably both a Jewish and a Christian apocalyptic tradition that used blood and horses to depict the carnage of divine judgment and the final battle.

This terrible bloodbath also flowed for a distance of “1,600 stadia” (about 184 miles). There are several possible explanations of this number. (1) If taken literally, it refers to the length of Palestine from the Syrian border in the north to the Egyptian border in the south. As such it would picture the greatest slaughter in history, covering the entire Holy Land in blood. (2) If taken symbolically, it equals $4^2 \times 10^2$ and would symbolize the completeness of God’s judgment (the meaning of fours and tens in the book) or perhaps the whole world, referring to the four corners of the earth (the angels holding back the four winds in 7:1; cf. Mark 13:27 and Matt. 24:31). (3) Or it could equal 40^2 and symbolize divine judgment (Num. 14:33 of Israel’s forty years in the wilderness; Deut. 25:3 of a criminal beaten with forty lashes). A combination of the first two seems most likely. I prefer a similar literal meaning to the 12,000 stadia for the size of the New Jerusalem in 21:16 (= the breadth of the Roman Empire); and the symbolic approach also makes sense since tens and fours provide some of the primary numerical symbols of the book. Overall, the emphasis is on the finality and terrible scope of the divine judgment on those who have so mistreated God’s people.

Summary and Contextualization

The eternal rewards and punishments of 14:6–13 will occur at the final harvest or last judgment. The “harvest” of grain (14:14–16) will be the harvest of the saints (the “wheat” of Matt. 13:24–30),

as the “Son of Man” takes his sickle and reaps the harvest of saints from the earth. The “harvest” of grapes (Rev. 14:17–20) will be the harvest of sinners, as the angel of judgment reaps the terrible harvest of those who have rejected the divine offer of repentance pay the full price of their awful sins. The terrible carnage that results is God’s *lex talionis* (law of retribution), as they too are “judged according to their works” (see 18:6; 20:13). Since they “shed the blood of God’s saints and prophets” (16:6), their blood is forfeit. Again, God’s wrath is poured out “full strength” (14:10) on the evildoers, “as they deserve” (16:6).

Additional Notes

14:14. In terms of the harvest of 14:14–16 as the culmination of the “firstfruits” in 14:4, Schnabel (1999: 13) challenges this understanding of “firstfruits,” saying that (1) it reinforces the certainty of the harvest as an eschatological pledge (cf. Rom. 8:23); (2) it expresses the totality of believers rather than hinting at more to come (cf. Jer. 2:2–3; 2 Kings 19:30–31); (3) it stresses that they are God’s possession and under his protection; (4) they are firstfruits, not in the sense of the course of history but at the end of history, and the conversion of the nations is not in the context. All these points are viable interpretations and paralleled in Scripture, but the immediate context must decide. If 14:6–7 is an actual offer of salvation and a demand to repent, then the context indeed has an element of God’s mission to the world in it. From this perspective, the “firstfruits” of 14:4 would look forward to the “eternal gospel” going to the nations in the narrative line of the chapter, and 14:14–16 would constitute the harvest of sinners anticipated in 14:4, 6–7.

14:18. Ἐξῆλθεν is missing from ⁴⁷ A 1611 2053 et al. and found either after ἄγγελος (² C P 046 1006 et al.) or after θυσιαστηρίου (051 1854 2073). It occurs in 14:17 and could have been added here in assimilation to that verse, but such repetition is often found in the Apocalypse. Still, that it occurs in two places and the excellence of the manuscript evidence against it (see Aune 1998a: 790) make it slightly more likely that it should be omitted.

14:20. Some later manuscripts have “1,606 stadia” (1876 2014 2036 2037 2042 et al.), while others have “1,200 stadia” (206 203 *² syr^{pb}). The former is almost certainly a scribal error, and the latter is due to its obvious symbolic value. The better manuscript evidence (² c A C P 025 046 et al.) favors “1,600 stadia.”

2. Great Conflict Culminated (15:1–16:21)

The interlude of chapters 12–14 began with the great conflict between Satan and God's people (chaps. 12–13) and ended with the eschaton and harvest of both the righteous and the wicked (14:14–20). Now the narrative returns to the judgments by which God will accomplish the final destruction of evil. The emphasis once more is on the sovereignty of God as he controls even the plots of the satanic forces to his own ends. The introduction to the bowl septet (15:1–8) focuses both on the preparation of the seven angels, as they get ready to leave the heavenly temple and bring the final plagues to earth (15:1, 5–8), and on the joy of the victorious martyrs, as they celebrate the saving deeds of almighty God (15:2–4). The first four bowls parallel the first four trumpets but now affect the whole earth and prove finally the sovereignty of God over the earthly powers as well as the depravity of the people as they twice more reject God's offer of repentance (16:9, 11). The last three bowls continue the theme of depravity as they not only refuse to repent but curse God (16:11). The judgment on the throne of the beast (16:10–11) leads to the final act of defiance from the powers of evil as they call the nations to Armageddon (16:16). Finally, the storm theophany of 16:12–14 is intensified, and the cosmic portents show that the eschaton has arrived (16:17–21). The bowl judgments differ radically from the seals and trumpets in that there are no interludes to define the conflict and the place of the people of God in these events. Since the eschaton is here, there are to be no interruptions as God brings this age to a close.

a. Introduction to the Bowls—Angels with Final Plagues (15:1–8)

There are three parts to this vision with an ABA pattern (each with the typical formula *Kai εἶδον*, *Kai eidon*, And I saw). At the outset, 15:1 introduces the angels with the last plagues, then 15:5–8 show how the heavenly tabernacle is opened and the angels are readied for their deadly mission. Sandwiched between this is the song of the victorious saints as they thank the omnipotent God for his wondrous deeds (15:2–4). As in Mark’s “sandwiching” episodes (Mark 3:19–35; 5:21–43; 11:12–25; 14:1–11), the two interpret one another. The joy of the victorious saints is the reason for and result of the angels’ mission of judgment. The bowl judgments will vindicate the saints for all they have suffered (16:5–7). This introductory section parallels 8:1–5, which introduced the trumpet judgments, and like this earlier passage, 15:1–8 alludes back to the previous interlude as well as preparing for the judgments to follow. Beale (1999: 784–85, following Yarbrough Collins 1976: 16–19) correctly sees an “interlocking function,” in which 15:1–8 both concludes the vindication of the saints and judgment of the sinners from chapter 14 and prepares for the final set of judgments in the bowl septet of chapter 16.[1] Since the victorious saints sing “the song of Moses” (15:3), the exodus motif further informs the plagues of the trumpets and bowls and their echo of the Egyptian plagues. The seven angels of 15:1, 6, 8 link the angels of the trumpet judgments with those of the bowls. The “great and wondrous sign” of 15:1 refers back to the “signs” of 12:1, 3 and indicates that the “sign” events are at an end—God is now to wrap up the final events of world history.

- i. Wondrous sign—angels with plagues (15:1)
- ii. Song of victorious saints (15:2–4)
- iii. Seven angels emerge from heavenly temple (15:5–8)
 - (1) Preparatory events (15:5–6)
 - (2) Commissioning of angels (15:7–8)

Exegesis and Exposition

¹And I saw another great and wondrous sign in heaven, seven angels having the seven last plagues, because with them the wrath of God is complete.

²Then I saw something like a sea of glass mixed with fire, and standing on it were those who have emerged triumphant out of conflict with the beast and with his image and with the number of his name. They were playing harps for God ³and singing the song of Moses, God’s slave, that is, the song about the Lamb:

“Great and wondrous are your deeds,
Lord God Almighty;
just and true are your ways,
King of the nations.

⁴Who will not fear you, O Lord,
and glorify your name?
For you alone are holy,
for all the nations will come and worship before you,
for your righteous deeds have been revealed.”

⁵And after this I saw the temple, namely the tabernacle of testimony, opened in heaven. ⁶And seven angels came out having seven plagues. They were clothed with pure, shining linen and had golden sashes around their chests. ⁷Then one of the four living creatures gave to the seven angels seven golden bowls filled with the wrath of God, who lives forever and ever. ⁸And the temple was filled with smoke from the glory of God and from his power, and no one was able to enter the temple until the seven plagues

from the seven angels were completed.

i. Wondrous Sign—Angels with Plagues (15:1)

In 12:1 the first σημεῖον μέγα (*sēmeion mega*, great sign) appeared, the “woman clothed with the sun.” In 12:3 “another sign” appeared, the “great red dragon.” Now a third sign appears, like the others “in heaven.” But this is the only one that is μέγα καὶ θαυμαστόν (*mega kai thaumaston*, great and wondrous). This language occurs elsewhere in the Apocalypse only at 15:3, which describes the “great and wondrous deeds” of the Lord God Almighty. In the LXX θαυμαστός is often used of the “marvelous deeds” of God, and the emphasis here is on the positive action of God in bringing history to a close. It is “wonderful” to see. This time the sign is “seven angels having the seven last plagues.” As many point out (Lohse, Chilton, Krodel, Roloff, Aune), 15:1 serves as a superscription or summary for the whole of 15:1–16:21. In actuality these angels do not appear on the scene until 15:8, so this provides a kind of summary of the implications of their coming action, stating that these are the “last plagues” of the three judgment septets. Πληγή (*plēgē*, plague) is used in 9:18, 20 of the trumpet judgments and in 11:6 of the parallel “plagues” that the two witnesses heaped on the earth-dwellers who opposed them. Here it is used of the bowl judgments in 15:1, 6, 8; and 16:9 and stresses the connection of these judgments with the Egyptian plagues. Those were a sign to the Egyptians of God’s power in judgment and to Israel of God’s mercy and deliverance. As we will see, both aspects are highlighted here.

But these bowls are not merely the “last” of the series but also the “last” judgments of history (contra Beale 1999: 786), for John anchors them with ὅτι ἐν αὐταῖς ἐτελέσθη ὁ θυμὸς τοῦ θεοῦ (*hoti en autais etelesthē ho thymos tou theou*, because with them the wrath of God is complete). This is the same idea as 10:7, where “the mystery of God is complete” at the sounding of the seventh trumpet. As I said there, ἐτελέσθη is a divine passive and refers to the completion of God’s plan and to the end of human history. Giesen (1997: 342) calls this the last divine lawsuit in human history. Here it means that the “wrath of God” (stressed in 6:16–17; 11:18; 16:19; 19:15 with ὀργή; and in 14:10, 19; 15:7; 16:1, 19; 19:15 with θυμός) has come to completion.^[2] This is in keeping with the use of “the wrath of God” in the NT, where it normally connotes the final wrath at the eschaton (Matt. 3:7; Rom. 2:5, 8; 5:9; Eph. 5:6; Col. 3:6). In the OT the “wrath of God” usually has covenant implications and does not have the irrational connotations that the wrath of the gods often had in the pagan world. It was directed against Israel when they disobeyed the covenant (1 Sam. 6:19; 1 Chron. 13:10; Ps. 95:10–11; Zeph. 1:15) or against the nations when they went against God’s covenant people (Isa. 13:3–4; Jer. 50:13–14; Ps. 110:5). Here in Revelation there are also covenant implications in light of the exodus motif in 15:1, 3. Those who disobey God’s commands and flaunt both his will and his people will face his wrath.

ii. Song of Victorious Saints (15:2–4)

With the second καὶ εἶδον (*kaieidon*, and I saw) of the passage, John introduces the great vision of the saints in heaven. They are standing beside ὡς θάλασσαν ὑαλίνην^[3] μεμιγμένην πυρί (*hōs thalassan hyalinēn memigmenēn pyri*, [something] like a sea of glass mixed with fire). On the comparative ὡς, see 4:5–6a. This scene is reminiscent of 4:6, in which John saw in front of the throne of God “something like a sea of glass, crystal clear.” This means that the saints are standing before the throne itself. As in 4:6, the “sea of glass” alludes to the firmament of the waters in Gen. 1:7, the bronze sea in Solomon’s temple (1 Kings 7:23–26), and the “expanse, sparkling like ice, and

awesome,” above the living creatures in Ezek. 1:22. It is a major metaphor for the majesty of God. Here, however, it is “mixed with fire,” an image of judgment as in the “lake of fire” of 19:20; 20:10, 14, 15; 21:8 (R. Charles, Lohmeyer, Aune).^[4] God judges saints and sinners from his throne (see 20:11–15), and this scene looks forward to that event. The opinion of some (Kiddle, Farrer, Caird, Sweet, Roloff, Beale) that this “fiery sea” alludes to the “Red Sea” of the exodus event is possible,^[5] but the view that the “sea” here symbolizes evil overcome by the sovereign presence of Yahweh (Beale 1999: 789) does not fit the scene as well as the majestic image from 4:6. If the Red Sea image is present, it would symbolize deliverance, as the Israelites were rescued from the Egyptian chariots through the sea (Roloff 1993: 183), and perhaps judgment (of the Egyptians). This seems a bit too allegorical, however, and the image of majesty and vindication (from 4:6) fits better. It is common today (Roloff; Bauckham 1993b: 297; Beale; Aune) to stress the exodus typology, picturing the victorious saints as Israel who passed through the sea unharmed and stood on the other side. I agree with Michaels (1997: 182 note on 15:2), however, that neither the redness of the sea nor the turbulence of the sea is present here. The connection in 15:2a is with the crystal sea before the throne of God in 4:6 rather than with the Red Sea crossing of the exodus. The exodus motif is found in the larger theme of the eschaton as a new exodus and deliverance of God’s people, but the narrower view of the saints passing through the Red Sea is too allegorical.

The saints therefore “stand on”^[6] the crystal sea as conquerors, for they have “emerged victorious out of [ΝΙΚΩΝΤΑΣ ΕΚ, *nikōntas ek*; see additional note on 15:2] conflict with” three things: “the beast, his image, and the number of his name.” The image of “conquering” is one of the critical themes of the book (see 2:7, 11, 17, 26; 3:5, 12, 21; 5:5; 6:2; 11:7; 12:11; 13:7; 17:14; 21:7) and pictures the saints as victors over temptation, the pressures of the world, and the cosmic powers of evil. Even as the beast “conquers” the saints by killing them (11:7; 13:7), he is being “conquered by” the saints (12:11) and the Lamb (17:14).^[7] Their death is their final victory! As a result, the saints will rejoice in their victory (15:2–4) and inherit the new heavens and new earth (21:7). This inheritance is especially spelled out in the seven letters (so Mounce 1998: 285), as the saints who emerge victorious are promised the tree of life (2:7), deliverance from the second death (2:11), the hidden manna (2:17), authority over the nations (2:26), white garments and their names in the book of life (3:5), the honor of becoming pillars in God’s temple with the name of God written on them (3:12), and the honor of sitting with Christ on his throne (3:21). The three aspects of the Antichrist over which they emerge victorious are drawn from 13:1–2 (the beast), 14 (his image), and 17–18 (the number of his name). They sum up all aspects of the evil empire by which the Antichrist will force the nations to worship him instead of God. As such they stress the personal conflict (with the beast), the religious pressure (with his image), and the economic persecution (with the number of his name).

As they stand on the crystal sea, they have κιθάρας τοῦ θεοῦ (*kitharas tou theou*, lit., “harps of God”). Τοῦ θεοῦ could be a genitive of source (harps given from God) or an objective genitive (harps played for God) or perhaps a possessive genitive (God’s harps). In light of the song they sing, an objective genitive may be best. The worship of the scene, in which they play harps and sing in the presence of God, is in the forefront of the picture here. As with the elders in 5:8 (see the discussion of κιθάρας there) and the 144,000 in 14:2, the use of harps adds OT imagery (harps were common in temple worship) and brings out the worship of the scene more clearly.

With their harps they were “singing the song of Moses” (15:3). Christ had delivered them from the dragon with his blood (12:11), and God had given them victory over the false trinity. Thus, like Moses after the exodus from Egypt, they sing a song of victory. The Song of Moses itself is found in

Exod. 15:1–19 or perhaps in Deut. 31:30–32:43 (both are called the “song of Moses,” Exod. 15:1; Deut. 31:30). Though it is commonly said that Exod. 15 is closer to the themes here, some (Beasley-Murray, Giesen, Beale) have noted that both are reflected in this hymn. Du Rand (1995: 203–5) believes that Deut. 32 is closer and sees the key terms “works/deeds,” “ways,” and “holy” drawn from there. The song combines the war tradition with the eschatological exodus tradition, possibly alluding also to the David and Goliath tradition (cf. Tosefta Targum on 1 Sam. 17) to portray the victory of the Lamb over the beast (du Rand 1995: 207–8). Thus, liberation and restoration are the major themes as God’s people experience a new exodus (so also McIlraith 1999: 522–23). The problem is that the wording of the song has little connection with either Exod. 15 or Deut. 32. Therefore, many (e.g., Caird, Farrer, Schüssler Fiorenza, Krodel) have noted that the song here is a concatenation of themes drawn from many places in the OT. Moses is called “God’s slave” (see 11:18 on this term), as often in the OT (Num. 12:7; Deut. 34:5; Josh. 1:1, 15; Ps. 105:26; etc.).^[8] The use here is probably drawn from Exod. 14:31, where it introduces the “song of Moses” that celebrated the miracle of God’s deliverance at the Red Sea.

The added καὶ τὴν ᾠδὴν τοῦ ἀρνίου (*kaitēn ōdēn tou arniou*, lit., “and the song of the Lamb”) is somewhat difficult, for there is no hint that there are two songs here. Therefore, the καὶ is most likely epexegetical (“that is”), and the genitive is objective. Thus, I translate, “the song of Moses, that is, the song about the Lamb.” This means that the victory being celebrated was won by the Lamb, in keeping with 12:11, “They conquered him by the blood of the Lamb.” The emphasis on the Lamb highlights Jesus’ paschal sacrifice of his blood for the redemption of the nations. Kraft (1974: 201) sees this as a baptismal hymn focused on the fact that both Moses and the Lamb have “led their people through water to a new life.” However, there is too little evidence of baptismal symbolism here. More viable is Fenske (1999: 255), who sees the Song of Moses stemming from Deut. 32:4–5 and the song of the Lamb stemming from Ps. 85:9–10 from the standpoint of the conquering Lamb. Therefore, it may be a Christian war scroll (so also du Rand 1995).

The first half of the hymn (15:3b) is structured as synonymous parallelism (see the translation above), with two descriptions of God followed by a title. The second half (15:4) is introduced by a connected pair of rhetorical questions, which are answered by three ὅτι (*hoti*, because) clauses. Meynet (1991: 22–23) points out that the form of the hymn here follows the form in Exod. 15, with praise of God for his deeds framing the central question (Exod. 15:11 = Rev. 15:4a). The whole celebrates the saving deeds of God and the worship that results from it. No details of victorious deeds are mentioned here because they have been recounted in chapter 14; this hymn celebrates the victories already mentioned and so focuses on the characteristics of the God who conquered the forces of evil on behalf of his people. This could be a preexisting hymn, but the phrasing has many parallels with the rest of this book (e.g., “Lord God Almighty”) and so is more likely composed for this occasion.

The first line celebrates how μεγάλα καὶ θαυμαστά (*megala kai thaumasta*, great and wondrous) are God’s deeds. This reflects Ps. 111:3 LXX, “Great and majestic are his deeds,” as well as Deut. 28:59–60 LXX, “great and wondrous plagues” (so Beale 1999: 794; Mounce 1998: 286). But Bauckham (1993b: 298–300) goes further, showing how the hymn here partakes of a Jewish tradition of reinterpreting key texts via verbal links. As Isa. 12:1–6 (“Tell of his wonderful works . . . remember the wonderful works he has done”) builds on the Song of Moses, so the hymn here builds on both. The same “great and wondrous deeds” of judgment God exercised when he “hurled horse and rider into the sea” (Exod. 15:1) at the exodus is seen again when he hurls the enemies of the people of God into eternal punishment (Rev. 14:9–11, 17–20). Moreover, these acts of judgment are the work

of the “Lord God Almighty,” the primary title of God in the book, occurring in 4:8; 11:17; 15:3; 16:7; 19:6; 21:22, with ὁ παντοκράτωρ (*ho pantokratōr*, Almighty) also found in 1:8 (see the discussion there); 16:14; 19:15. Everywhere it appears it speaks of his omnipotence and sovereign control over all things in earth and heaven.

The first line celebrates God’s works, the second his ways. The first focuses on praise, the second on justice. In δίκαιαι καὶ ἀληθιναί (*dikaiai kai alēthinai*, just and true) there is an allusion to Deut. 32:4 (the other Song of Moses), “his works are true and all his ways are just” (also Ps. 145:17, “The Lord is just in all his ways”). This “farewell of Moses” focuses on the sovereign justice of Yahweh and a warning to rebellious Israel of his justice and wrath. Deuteronomy 32 is primarily a “covenant lawsuit” and can be organized via a covenant form, with witnesses (vv. 1–2), title of God (vv. 3–4), historical review (vv. 5–14), indictment (vv. 15–18), judgment (vv. 19–29), assurance of salvation (vv. 30–38), and the divine oath (vv. 39–42) (see Niehaus, *NIDOTTE* 4:539). The covenant idea is part of the justice theme of Revelation. The people of this world have broken the final covenant with God and so face his eternal wrath.

To the wonder of his judgments in line one is added the justice and truth behind those judgments in line two. This prepares for the statement of *lex talionis* (law of retribution) in 16:5 interpreting the outpouring of the bowls, “You are just in these judgments, you who are and who were, the Holy One, because you have so judged.” Then 16:7 gives the refrain, “Yes, Lord God Almighty, true and just are your judgments.” Finally, in 19:2 the theme is echoed again, celebrating the destruction of Babylon the Great in chapter 18, “True and just are his judgments.” Thus, we are at the heart of theodicy in the book, as God’s judgment is seen to be both legally just and morally true (see Osborne 1993: 63–77 on “theodicy” in the Apocalypse).

The title “King of the nations” introduces another major theme, for in 15:4b the “nations” “come and worship” God. Thus, there is movement from sovereign judgment here to salvific promise in verse 4b. The title is probably taken from Jer. 10:7 (also used in the next line), but the idea of God ruling the nations is found also in the Psalms (22:28; 47:8; 96:10; 97:1) and elsewhere (1 Chron. 16:31). In Revelation βασιλεύς (*basileus*, king) is normally used of earthly rulers (1:5; 6:15; 10:11; 16:12, 14; 17:2, 10, 12, 18; 18:3, 9; 19:18, 19; 21:24), but all this prepares for the two exceptions, for only God is “king of the nations” (15:3), and only Christ is “King of kings and Lord of lords” (17:14 and 19:16; cf. 1:5, where he is “ruler of the kings of the earth”). Moreover, the verb cognate is used only of God’s “reigning” forever and ever (11:15, 17; 19:6) and his saints with him (5:10; 20:4, 6; 22:5). Exodus 15:18 ends the Song of Moses with, “The Lord will reign forever and ever.” Thus, one of the primary themes of Revelation, the eternal reign of God, is closely connected with the Song of Moses.

Lines three and four (15:4) introduce rhetorical questions that dominate the rest of the hymn. The first, “Who will not fear you?” is drawn from Jer. 10:7. In form, οὐ μὴ φοβηθῇ (*ou mē phobēthē*, will not fear) is emphatic future negation and means that no one can ever at any time fail to fear God when they realize his sovereignty and power. One could include the preceding title in 15:3b and translate Jer. 10:7, “O King of the nations, who will not fear you?” Jeremiah 10 concludes Jeremiah’s temple messages with a diatribe against idolatry (10:2–16), a prophecy of impending judgment because of Israel’s apostasy (10:17–22), and a prayer for justice and the destruction of the nations (10:23–25). Thus, the ascription “Who will not fear you?” is set in contrast to the “senseless and foolish” gods of the pagans and of the apostate nation. Immediately preceding 10:7 is “No one is like you, O LORD; you are great, and your name is mighty in power” (10:6). Interestingly, Jer. 10:6 parallels Exod. 15:11 in the Song of Moses, “Who among the gods is like you, O LORD? Who is like

you—majestic in holiness, awesome in glory, working wonders?"; and it is Exod. 15:11 that Bauckham (1993b: 305) believes is the "common denominator" for the allusions in the rest of this hymn (Jer. 10:6–7; Ps. 86:8–10). In other words, it is the incomparability of God that dominates the last half of the hymn here in 15:4. This is meaningful in light of the imperial cult of John's day and the earthly gods countered in the plagues of the trumpet and bowl judgments.

Line four adds, "and glorify your name" (the future **δοξάσει**, *doxasei*, continues the force of the subjunctive "will not fear" in the first clause). This is drawn from Ps. 86:9 ("All the nations . . . will bring glory to your name"). Psalm 86 contains a plea for help when besieged by enemies, and the core part of it is David's worship of the incomparable God in 86:8–10, beginning with "Among the gods there is none like you, O LORD" (v. 8a), followed by "All the nations will come and worship before you, O LORD, and will bring glory to your name." The theme is virtually identical with Exod. 15:11 and Jer. 10:6–7 and shows the continuity between those passages. When one realizes the double theme of the judgment and worship of the nations, the motif of mission in the Apocalypse comes to mind. The nations will experience the wrath of God, but at the same time some will indeed "fear and glorify" (note these two aspects from the "eternal gospel" of Rev. 14:6–7 here as well) God, referring to conversion (see also 11:13). This will be explored further below as "all nations will come and worship."

Three **ὅτι** (*hoti*, because) clauses conclude the hymn and provide the ground or reason why all should fear and glorify Yahweh. The first is the natural conclusion to the two rhetorical questions, **μόνος ὅσιος** (*monos hosios*, you alone are holy). The motif of the incomparability of God continues with his primary attribute, holiness. The term **ὅσιος** occurs only here and in 16:5 ("you who are and who were, the Holy One") in the book, and **ἅγιος** is the normal term (twenty-four times in Revelation). However, its presence is not due to a difference in meaning^[9] but to the influence of the LXX. This statement echoes Ps. 145:17 LXX, "The Lord is righteous in all his ways and holy (**ὅσιος**) in all his works." The same is true of 16:5, which may go back to the same Deut. 32:4 LXX (Song of Moses) used above, which celebrated that God is **δίκαιος καὶ ὅσιος** (*dikaïos kai hosios*, just and holy). Thus, the message here is that God alone among the "gods" is holy, which signifies that he is set apart from this world and stands above it. He is the incomparable God who stands alone above all earthly forces. As Beckwith (1919: 675) notes, this "holiness" does not stress his sinlessness so much as his "unapproachable majesty and power."

The second reason^[10] why all should fear and glorify Yahweh is because "all the nations" **ἔξουσιν καὶ προσκυνήσουσιν** (*hēxousin kai proskynēsousin*, will come and worship) God. This is startling in a context of judgment, but as we have seen throughout this study of the Apocalypse, judgment and salvation are frequently juxtaposed. For instance, one of the first OT allusions came in the echo of Zech. 12:10 in Rev. 1:7, "All the peoples of the earth will mourn because of him," and I argued there for a double meaning: of judgment for those who reject the offer of salvation, and of mercy for those who accept it (in keeping with the context of Zech. 12:10 of mourning for sin). Also, in Rev. 5:9 as the Lamb is about to open the scrolls of judgment, he is worshiped as one who "with his blood purchased" people "from every tribe, language, people, and nation." In 14:6–7, just before the angels proclaiming judgment are released, the angel with the "eternal gospel" calls on the nations to "fear God and give him glory," closely parallel to the "fear and glorify" above. The message of the book is that by their reaction to the call to repentance (which is one of the primary purposes of the seals, trumpets, and bowls), the nations will face either judgment or salvation, either the wrath of God or his mercy.

The theme of the conversion of the nations and the procession of the nations to Jerusalem is

frequent in the OT. As above, Ps. 86:9–10 is the primary passage, “All the nations you have made will come and worship before you, O Lord; they will bring glory to your name. For you do great and marvelous deeds; you alone are God.” This motif is also found in Ps. 46:10; 47:9; 102:15; Isa. 2:2–4; 14:1–2; 45:23; 60:1–3; 66:18–23; Jer. 16:19; Zech. 8:20–23. For the OT the coming of the nations to Zion was final proof of the glory and might of Yahweh, and this theme is central to the Apocalypse as well.^[11] Of course, this does not imply universalism, for most among the nations will refuse to repent (Rev. 9:20–21; 16:9, 11) and will face the final judgment (20:13–14).

The third ground for the glory and fear of Yahweh is τὰ δικαιώματά σου ἐφανερώθησαν (*ta dikaïōmata sou ephanerōthēsan*, your righteous deeds have been revealed). As Aune (1998a: 876) points out, this could have a negative connotation, “your righteous judgments” (so NRSV, R. Charles, Kraft, Morris, Ford; Lohmeyer 1926: 128 sees it as both judgment and righteous deeds, and Chilton 1987: 388 as “the salvation of the world”) in light of chapter 14, but in this context of the worship of the nations, it is better to see it as more positive, “your righteous actions.” This may combine Ps. 86:9–10 (“great and marvelous deeds”) with Ps. 98:2, “The Lord has . . . revealed his righteousness to the nations.” It celebrates the revelation of the righteous deeds of God in pouring out his judgments and thereby calling the nations to repentance, resulting in many conversions (11:13).

iii. Seven Angels Emerge from Heavenly Temple (15:5–8)

(1) Preparatory Events (15:5–6)

The introductory Καὶ μετὰ ταῦτα εἶδον (*Kai meta tauta eidon*, And after this I saw) occurs in 7:1; 15:5; and 18:1, and with the added “and behold” also occurs in 4:1 and 7:9. It can introduce major sections (4:1; 7:1; 18:1) or minor sections (7:9; 15:5). When John looked at this next vision, he ἤνοιγεν ὁ ναός (*ēnoigē ho naos*, the temple opened). As in 11:19, the temple “in heaven” is once more opened (in 4:1 it is the door to heaven that is opened), and as there, this may go back to the tearing of the veil at Jesus’ death (Mark 15:38 par.), itself a symbol of judgment. In 11:19 the opening of the temple/Holy of Holies symbolized the actual eschaton, but here it leads to the final set of preliminary judgments that prepare the way for the eschaton. The temple is further defined as τῆς σκηνῆς τοῦ μαρτυρίου (*tēs skēnēs tou martyriou* [an exegetical genitive meaning], the tabernacle of testimony). This links the heavenly temple with the tabernacle or “tent” in the wilderness, and the added “of testimony” refers to the stone tablets placed in the ark to signify the Ten Commandments as a “witness” to the centrality of Torah for Israel (see Exod. 25:16, 21; Deut. 10:1–2; 1 Kings 8:9; 2 Chron. 5:10). The Holy of Holies or the ark itself are often called “the Testimony” in the OT (Exod. 16:34; 27:21; Lev. 16:13; Num. 1:50; 17:4, 10). The purpose for this description is to insert the idea of covenant, with its attendant blessings and cursings. The nations have broken covenant with God and must face the consequences. In 11:19 the ark may have been a sign of mercy, but here it is a sign of judgment.

Out of the heavenly temple in 15:6 there now emerges οἱ ἑπτὰ ἄγγελοι (*hoi hepta angeloi*, the seven angels; the anaphoric article points back to the introduction of these angels in 15:1). As in 15:1, these are carrying “seven plagues” with which to carry out God’s judicial sentence on the sinners. While they are not given “the bowls filled with the wrath of God” until the next verse, the plagues that will be the content of those bowls are already in their hands. The judgments are called “plagues” elsewhere (9:18, 20; 11:6; 13:3, 12, 14; 15:1, 8; 16:9, 21; 18:4, 8; 21:9; 22:18) and thus are linked closely with the Egyptian plagues of the exodus. As in those other occurrences, here they

demonstrate the sovereignty of Yahweh over the earthly gods and call for the earth-dwellers to yield to him. Several point out (Moffatt, Lohmeyer, Beale) an echo of Lev. 26:21 LXX, “I will also bring on you seven plagues.” The covenant blessings and cursings (seven are mentioned in vv. 18, 21, 24, 28) of that chapter may well be behind many of the emphases here.

The seven angels are ἐνδεδυμένοι λίνον καθαρὸν λαμπρόν (*endedymenoī linon katharon lampron*, clothed with pure, shining linen). This is the only occurrence of λίνον in Revelation (elsewhere βύσσινος, *byssinos*, linen, is used; cf. 18:12, 16; 19:8, 14), and it refers to a linen garment normally worn by priests. Aune (1998a: 878) traces its background. Leviticus 16:4, 23 refer to the linen garments worn by priests, and elsewhere linen garments are also worn by angels (Ezek. 9:2–3, 11; Dan. 10:5; 12:6–7). In Jos. As. 3.6 Aseneth wears “a linen robe interwoven with violet and gold and a golden girdle.” Thus, the angels seem to have a priestly function here. That they are “pure” and “shining” links them with “shining, pure linen” (same terms but with βύσσινος instead of λίνον) given the bride of the Lamb in 19:8. In 19:14 the armies of heaven have “white, pure linen” (so also Lohmeyer 1926: 129). Thus, this imagery stresses the purity and glory of the seven angels. In addition, these seven angels have περιεζωσμένοι περὶ τὰ στήθη ζώνας χρυσᾶς (*periezōsmenoī peri ta stēthē zōnas chrysas*, golden sashes around their chests). This closely resembles the description of “the one like a Son of Man” in 1:13b “with a golden sash around his chest.” A golden sash symbolized royalty or elevated status and with 1:13 may indicate that these angels are emissaries of Christ, pouring out his judicial penalty on the evildoers.

(2) Commissioning of Angels (15:7–8)

The “four living creatures” formed the innermost circle (with the elders and angelic host forming the outer circles) surrounding the throne of God in 4:6–7. Combining the functions of the cherubim of Ezek. 1 and the seraphim of Isa. 6, they appear to be the leaders of the heavenly court, as seen in their function throughout Revelation. They have guided heavenly worship in 5:6–7, sent out the four horsemen of the Apocalypse in 6:1–8, and participated in worship in 7:11 and 14:3. Their final appearance in the book will be to fall before God and cry out “amen, hallelujah” in 19:4. As in 6:1–2, here they function as celestial heralds mediating God’s judicial penalty on the unbelievers.

The ἑπτὰ ἰάλας χρυσᾶς (*hepta phialas chrysas*, seven golden bowls) are connected with the “golden bowls” filled with incense and the prayers of the saints in 5:8. These could be the golden saucers found on the table of showbread and used for sacred libations to God (Exod. 25:29; 27:3; 38:3) as were the censers in Rev. 5:8. By using these bowls, two points would be made: (1) the outpouring of judgment is a sacred offering to God, vindicating his name and bringing him glory; and (2) they come in response to the prayers of the saints (5:8, cf. 8:3–5). Thus, the golden bowls would link prayer with divine retribution (so Mounce 1998: 289; Giesen 1997: 346).

But they may not be exactly the same as the ones in 5:8. Here the bowls are γεμούσας τοῦ θυμοῦ τοῦ θεοῦ (*gemousas tou thymou tou theou*, filled with the wrath of God) rather than incense, so these are probably the “sprinkling bowls” (LXX ἱάλαι) used at the altar of burnt offering, made of bronze in Exod. 27:3 and 38:3 and of gold in 2 Chron. 4:8. These bowls were used for sprinkling the blood of the sacrifices and would be even stronger in making the outpouring of judgment a sacred offering to God. As Beale (1999: 806) brings out, this could also refer to the “cup of wrath” in Isa. 51:17, 22 that had formerly been poured out on disobedient Israel and was now to be poured out on her “tormenters,” namely Babylon (see Rev. 16:19, where God gives Babylon “the cup filled with the wine of the fury of his wrath”). The “wrath of God” and of the Lamb overwhelmed the earth-dwellers in 6:15–17, fell on the nations in 11:18, and was drunk “full strength” by those who

worshipped the beast in 14:10, 19. In the seven plagues of 15:1, “God’s wrath is complete” (cf. 16:1, 19; 19:15). The God of wrath is further described as “the one who lives forever and ever,” a reference back to the worship of the living creatures and elders in 4:9–10, where it is closely connected to his majesty as “the one who sits on the throne.” The eternity of God is part of his sovereign majesty, and many of the hymns ascribe praise to God and the Lamb “forever and ever” (5:13; 7:12) or proclaim both their eternal reign (11:15) and our eternal reign with them (22:5). When the angel proclaims “There will be no more delay” in the coming of final judgment, he “swears by him who lives forever and ever” (10:6). Finally, the judgment itself is eternal (14:11; 19:3; 20:10).

As the angels are commissioned for their mission of judgment and their bowls are “filled with God’s wrath,” ἐγεμίσθη ὁ ναὸς καπνοῦ (*egemisthē ho naos kapnou*, the temple was filled with smoke) in 15:8. The parallel with 15:7 is obvious: the bowl is “filled with wrath,” and the temple is “filled with smoke.” This smoke comes “from the glory of God and from his power,” signifying his majesty and sovereign omnipotence. Throughout the OT, smoke symbolizes the awesome presence of God, as in the cloud of smoke at Sinai (Exod. 24:15–16, where the cloud is also linked with “the glory of Yahweh”) and the cloud that became the Shekinah presence of God at the exodus (Exod. 13:21; 14:19, 24). Four OT passages are especially fruitful here: (1) When the tabernacle is set up in Exod. 40:34–35, “The cloud covered the Tent of Meeting, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle.” (2) When the ark is brought to the temple in 1 Kings 8:10–12, the “dark cloud” that symbolizes the presence of the Lord fills the temple with his glory. The last two are especially apropos in the context of judgment in Rev. 15:7. (3) In the great vision of the enthroned God in Isa. 6:1–4, the seraphim acclaim the holiness of God and state, “The whole earth is full of his glory,” and at that time “the temple is filled with smoke” (6:3–4), signifying the glorious presence of God as he tells Isaiah to proclaim his message of judgment.^[12] (4) Similarly, in the judgment of Israel as God’s glory departs from the temple in Ezek. 10:2–4, the cloud fills the inner court and temple with the glory of the Lord. These three images—smoke, glory, and power—combine to make the outpouring of judgment in Rev. 16 an act of worship. The name of God is vindicated, and his glory is demonstrated in these bowls of wrath.

The centrality of divine glory is seen in the final aspect of the scene, as “no one is able to enter the temple.” Interestingly, this is emphasized in two of the passages mentioned above: in Exod. 40:35, “Moses could not enter the Tent of Meeting,” and in 1 Kings 8:11, “The priests could not perform their service” (also 2 Chron. 7:2). In both cases it was because of the cloud and the “glory of the LORD” that “filled the temple.” Here as well the reason no one could enter was because of the theophanic presence of God and the imminence of judgment. There are several different interpretations of this: (1) Some believe that the temple is closed because there is no longer a place for intercession, either for divine mercy for the nations (R. Charles, Bruce, Mounce, Krodel) or for vindication and vengeance for the saints (Beale 1999: 807). (2) Others (Swete, Lohse, Lohmeyer, Chilton, Roloff, Thomas, Giesen) say no one can approach him until his wrath is complete. (3) Several (Beckwith, Caird, Beasley-Murray, Johnson) state that the temple is closed due to his awesome holiness, majesty, and power. The second and third are the more likely. On the basis of the OT parallels, the divine glory has made it impossible for anyone to enter the temple, and at the same time none is allowed until the seven plagues τελεσθῶσιν (*telesthōsin*, were completed). With this verb beginning (15:1) and ending (15:8) the section, the theme of God “completing” his judgment is strongly stressed. These are the final events of the scroll in chapters 5 and 10 and bring God’s plan for the eschaton to its final stage.

Summary and Contextualization

For us the idea of judgment is at best a somber and sorrowful thought, but the perspective of Revelation is quite different. In the visionary world of this book, it signifies the justice of God and the vindication of the saints. In the Lord's Prayer of Matt. 6:9–10, two concerns are intertwined: "May your name be kept sacred," and "May your kingdom come." These two ideas are also connected in the ancient Jewish Kaddish prayer that closed the synagogue service, "Exalted and sacred may his great name be in the world. . . . May he let his kingdom rule." It was believed that the name of God would be made sacred only when his kingdom arrived. Thus, the appearance of the angels with the "seven last plagues" is special because, as Rev. 15:1 says, the "wrath of God is complete," and at that event the glory of God will also be complete. The appearance of the angels is a "great and wondrous sign" because it signifies the onset of the final reign of God.

This is also why the victorious saints are celebrating in their "song of Moses" in 15:2–4. In the fifth seal (6:9–11), they echoed the words of David (Ps. 6:3; 13:1–2) in asking, "How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you . . . avenge our blood?" Here they joyfully celebrate God's answer, echoed in the words of the angel in 16:5–6, "You are just . . . because you have judged. For they have poured out the blood of the saints and prophets, and you have given them blood to drink. They are worthy." In 6:11 the martyred saints were given white robes and told to wait. Now they need wait no longer, and they stand in the place of triumph beside the throne on the "sea of glass mixed with fire" (cf. 4:6), holding harps like the living creatures and elders do in 5:8. Note that they do not recount their own deeds of faithfulness and perseverance nor celebrate their own triumphs in ministry. Their total attention is on what God has done, not on what they have accomplished. This is the perspective we must strive for in our age of pride and self-centeredness. Their song of victory will be ours when we too celebrate the great saving deeds and just ways of almighty God. Every time we cry out "How long?" in our own personal trials, we need also to sing this song of triumph in faith that God will indeed be faithful to his promises (Heb. 10:23). As E. Peterson (1988: 136–39) says, it is in worship that the answer to the "How long?" comes. As Moses celebrated the judgment of the Egyptians and deliverance of his people in Exod. 15 and Deut. 32, so we rejoice in his judgment and deliverance in our own lives. At the final judgment, all questions will be answered, and the one fact that will emerge is the justice and righteousness of God.

The results of his just judgment are found in Rev. 15:4. All will "fear" and "bring glory" to God, many in forced homage but some through conversion, even in those last days (cf. 11:13; 14:6–7). All will recognize God's omnipotence and justice and "fear" him, many in the terror of judgment but some in the joy of reverent worship. The greatest joy will be when the nations fall down in worship before God and the Lamb (cf. 21:24, 26; 22:2). Then the true "united nations" will occur, and for the first time all nationalistic barriers will be breached, and unity in worship will prevail. Then the final "racial reconciliation" will occur, and there will be oneness throughout the land. The "righteous deeds" of God that were seen in the seals, trumpets, and bowls will have done their work, and all the saints will be together as one, worshiping God. This means also that "denominational reconciliation" will finally be achieved, and we will stop fighting over doctrinal minutiae and worship styles, uniting in the one worship of the one God.

The earthly temple was opened at the death of Christ (Mark 15:38 par.), signifying both judgment and the opening of access to God (cf. Heb. 10:19–20). Thus, it is fitting that at this last act of judgment, inaugurating the final and eternal access to God, the temple is again opened,

permitting the emergence of the angels with the final plagues. They are dressed in “pure, shining linen,” emphasizing their priestly function in mediating God’s decrees, and “golden sashes,” emphasizing their exalted status as emissaries of Christ. They are given the “golden bowls” or saucers that were used to bear incense in the Holy Place, linking the outpouring of judgment with the prayers of the saints that were in “golden bowls” in 5:8. It is clear that these final plagues are God’s response to the prayers of vengeance in 6:10 (cf. also 8:3–5). As the bowls are given to the seven angels, smoke fills the temple and no one can enter. Often in the OT the smoke that signified the Shekinah glory of God made the temple too sacred to enter (Exod. 40:35; 1 Kings 8:11; 2 Chron. 7:2). God’s majesty is shown in divine judgment, and it is an especially sacred moment. Once more, we must gain an entirely different perspective on judgment to understand this. The righteous justice of God in judging his enemies is a time for joy, not sorrow.

Additional Notes

15:2. ΤΟΥΣ ΝΙΚΩΝΤΑΣ ἔκ: The use of ἔκ is unusual and has occasioned several possible interpretations: (1) Aune (1998a: 871, building on his article in 1991: 691–92) takes it as a Latinism, with the Latin victoria and the preposition de or ex behind it, meaning “victory over” the beast. (2) Others (N. Turner 1963: 260; BDF §212; BAGD 539) take ἔκ in an ablative sense meaning “victorious by separating themselves from (or keeping themselves from)” the beast. (3) Some (Mounce, Thomas) understand it as “deliverance from” the ordeal. (4) Several (Swete, Beckwith, R. Charles) see it as emerging triumphant “out of” their conflict with the beast. This is a difficult decision, for the lack of external evidence makes virtually any of these decisions possible. It is probably best in light of this to maintain the basic force of ἔκ and accept either the second, third, or fourth options. The second would emphasize the refusal of the saints to compromise by making alliances with the imperial cult (as did the Nicolaitan cult in 2:2–3, 14–15, 20–23). The third would stress God’s deliverance of the saints from the forces of evil. The fourth would stress the conflict itself. The third is weak in its understanding of ΝΙΚΩΝΤΑΣ, but the other two are equally strong in understanding the combination of ΝΙΚΩΝΤΑΣ and ἔκ. In the context of standing before the throne and singing the Song of Moses, it is slightly better to see the fourth as best. They emerge triumphant out of their conflict and stand on the crystal sea with harps in their hands.

15:3. There is a difficult text-critical decision to be made here, for the evidence is evenly divided between αἰώνων (see □⁴⁷ ⁷*,^c C 94 469 1006 1611 1841 et al.) and ἑθνῶν (⁷^a A P 046 051 Byz et al.). Some (Sweet 1979: 240; ASV, NIV, REB) have opted for “king of the ages” on the grounds that a later copyist changed it to “king of the nations” in assimilation to Jer. 10:7, used in the next line of this hymn. The majority agree with Metzger (1994: 679–80), however, and prefer “king of the nations” because it is more in keeping with the context, and a later scribe could also have changed it to “king of the ages” in assimilation to the title in 1 Tim. 1:17. On the whole, the criterion of more difficult reading could support “ages,” and contextual flow could support “nations.” In light of the importance of this in the context, I tentatively opt for “nations” here.

15:4. There are several different readings for οὐ μὴ ἰοβηθῇ (supported by A C P 046 1 1611 2053 et al.) with some adding σε at the beginning (□⁴⁷ 1006 2065 2073 et al.) or end (051 94 1828 1859 2020 et al.) of the phrase, while others omit οὐ (1854) or μὴ (⁷ 1006 2040 1841). Still, οὐ μὴ ἰοβηθῇ best accounts for the others.

15:6. There is an exceedingly difficult text-critical problem between “linen” and “stone” here. While λίνον is the choice of the critical Greek editions as well as the versions (supported by P 051 1 1006 1611 et al.), λίθον may have superior manuscript support (A C 2053 2062 vg et al.) and has the advantage of being the more difficult reading as well as a possible allusion to Ezek. 28:13 LXX, “every stone adorned you,” where it is part of the clothing of angels. Moreover, a third reading, λνοῦν, also has excellent support (□⁴⁷ ⁷ [λνοῦς] 046 94 1828) and has the advantage of being the more common term for a fabric made of flax. While Metzger (1994: 680) believes that λίνον is original because λίθον makes no sense in the context and is only superficially related to Ezek. 28:13, Beale (1999: 804–5) argues that it makes excellent sense because angelic clothing elsewhere has “a stone-like appearance” (Dan. 10:5–6; Rev. 1:13; 15:6), and stones like gold are called “pure” in the LXX (Job 28:19; Dan. 2:32) and in Rev. 15:6. As Aune (1998a: 854) points out, however, λίνον is also a more difficult reading because it is a rare term for a linen garment. The reading λνοῦν shows that later scribes had trouble thinking of λίνον as a linen garment. Therefore, I tentatively side with λίνον as the original reading because it makes more sense in the context and because there is too little evidence that λίθον was ever considered “pure” and “bright” (it cannot easily be linked with “gold”). The latter probably appeared due to a sight error.

b. Seven Last Bowl Judgments (16:1–21)

This differs from the seal and trumpet judgments in several particulars, such as the absence of interludes and the completeness of the judgments. The seals destroyed a quarter of the earth and the trumpets a third of the earth. The bowls will affect the whole earth. Moreover, while the seals and trumpets affected the people indirectly, the bowls are poured out directly on the earth-dwellers. The first produces boils on their bodies, the fourth scorches them with fire. These are also the final plagues that usher in the eschaton. However, the first four also parallel the first four trumpets in elaborating on the Egyptian plagues and being poured out on the earth, the seas, the inland waters, and the heavens in order. The last three (note once again the division into a series of four and three judgments) move the action inexorably to a close in gathering the nations for the Battle of Armageddon (sixth bowl) and the storm theophany that heralds the eschaton (seventh bowl).

While there are no interludes between the sixth and seventh or after the seventh bowl, there are three added features: the doxological hymn justifying the divine judgment (16:5–7), the false trinity calling the nations to the final battle (16:13–14), and Jesus' warning that he will come like a thief, so believers must be ready (16:15). There is a certain development of theme in these three additions, moving from the justice of God to the response of the evil powers and finally to the responsibility of the believer in light of all this. There is also a progression in the seven judgments, from natural disasters (the first four, replicating the first four seals and trumpets), to direct judgment against the throne of the beast (the fifth), to preparation for the final battle (the sixth), to the beginning of the destruction of Babylon the Great (the seventh), which prepares for the more detailed fall of Babylon in chapters 17–18. Many of the themes noted earlier in the seals and trumpets are continued: the wrath of God, the justice of God's *lex talionis* (the law of retribution), the infliction of the plagues only on the unbelievers, the judgments as God's response to the prayers of the saints for retribution, and the final chance for repentance. But now the final events are here. The total deconstruction of the empire of the beast is envisioned in these judgments. God is now the one who is and who was (16:5; cf. 11:17); there is no "is to come," for the end has arrived. God has done all that can be done to bring the nations to a realization of his sovereignty and justice, and now the time for final judgment has come. His wrath is complete (15:1).

i. Bowl plagues poured out on the natural realm (16:1–9)

- (1) Heavenly command (16:1)
- (2) First bowl: terrible sores (16:2)
- (3) Second bowl: sea turns to blood (16:3)
- (4) Third bowl: inland waters turn to blood (16:4)
- (5) Doxological hymn on divine justice (16:5–7)
- (6) Fourth bowl: the sun scorches people (16:8–9)

ii. Bowl plagues poured out on the beast's throne (16:10–21)

- (1) Fifth bowl: the beast's throne in darkness and pain (16:10–11)
- (2) Sixth bowl: preparation for final war (16:12–16)
 - (a) Euphrates dries up (16:12)

- (b) False trinity gathers kings for final battle (16:13–14)
- (c) Parenthesis—warning from Christ (16:15)
- (d) Kings gathered to Armageddon (16:16)
- (3) Seventh bowl—cosmic judgment (16:17–21)
 - (a) Voice from the throne (16:17)
 - (b) Storm theophany and earthquake (16:18–19a)
 - (c) Divine judgment (16:19b)
 - (d) Results of judgment (16:20–21)

Exegesis and Exposition

¹I heard a loud voice from the temple saying to the seven angels, “Go and pour out the seven bowls containing the wrath of God on the earth.” ²The first one departed and was pouring out his bowl on the earth, and a bad and evil sore broke out on the people who were having the mark of the beast and worshiping his image. ³And the second angel was pouring out his bowl on the sea, and it became blood like that of a corpse, and every living thing died. ⁴Then the third angel was pouring out his bowl on the rivers and the springs of water, and they became blood.

⁵Then I heard the angel of the waters saying,

“You are righteous, the one who is and who was, the Holy One, because you have judged.

⁶For they have poured out the blood of the saints and prophets. And you have given them blood to drink. They are worthy.”

⁷And I heard one from the altar saying,

“Yes, Lord God Almighty, your judgments are true and just.”

⁸Then the fourth angel was pouring out his bowl upon the sun, and God gave it power to burn people with fire. ⁹And people were scorched by its intense heat, but they blasphemed the name of God, who had control over the plagues, and did not repent so as to give him glory. ¹⁰Then the fifth angel was pouring out his bowl upon the throne of the beast. His kingdom was thrown into darkness, and they bit their tongues because of the pain. ¹¹But they blasphemed the God of heaven because of their pains and because of their sores, and they did not repent of their deeds. ¹²Then the sixth one was pouring out his bowl upon the great river Euphrates, and its water was dried up, with the result that the way was prepared for the kings of the east, ¹³and I saw three unclean spirits like frogs emerge from the mouth of the dragon, from the mouth of the beast, and from the mouth of the false prophet. ¹⁴These are spirits who are demons doing signs, and they are going out to the kings of the whole earth to gather them for the battle of the great day of God Almighty.

¹⁵“Behold, I am going to come like a thief! God blesses those who stay awake and keep their clothes on, so that they might not walk around naked and people see their shame.”

¹⁶Then they gathered them together to the place called in Hebrew Armageddon.

¹⁷The seventh angel poured out his bowl into the air, and a loud voice came out of the temple from the throne, saying, “It is over.” ¹⁸And there were flashes of lightning, the roar of the storm, and peals of thunder, and there was a great earthquake. Nothing like it has ever occurred since people have been on the earth, so great was the earthquake. ¹⁹The great city split into three parts, and the cities of the nations fell. God remembered Babylon the Great and gave her the cup of wine, namely his furious wrath. ²⁰Every island fled, and the mountains disappeared. ²¹Then huge hailstones weighing about a hundred pounds each fell from the heavens on the people, but the people cursed God on account of the plague of hail, because that plague was incredibly severe.

i. Bowl Plagues Poured out on the Natural Realm (16:1–9)

(1) Heavenly Command (16:1)

The seven angels are addressed by *μεγάλης ἰωνῆς ἐκ τοῦ ναοῦ* (*megalēs phōnēs ek tou naou*, a loud voice from the temple). The “loud voice” is often heard in Revelation (1:10; 5:2, 12; 6:10; 7:2, 10; 8:13; 10:3; 11:12, 15; 12:10; 14:7, 9, 15, 18; 19:1, 17; 21:3); and while it sometimes speaks “from heaven” (11:12, 15; 12:10; 14:2, 13), the only times it speaks “from the temple” are here and in 16:17, undoubtedly due to the temple scene in 15:5–8. Many (Beckwith, Beasley-Murray, Prigent, Mounce, Wall, Beale, Aune) believe that this is the voice of God and that there is an echo of Isa. 66:6

LXX, in which Isaiah tells the righteous remnant among the nation to “hear the voice from the temple, a voice from the Lord repaying his enemies all they deserve.” Since only God is in the temple (15:8), it must be he who speaks. The voice commands the angels, **ἐκχέετε τὰς ἑπτὰ ἰάλας τοῦ θυμοῦ τοῦ θεοῦ** (*ekcheete tas hepta phialas tou thymou tou theou*, pour out^[1] the seven bowls containing the wrath of God) onto the earth. The genitive **τοῦ θυμοῦ τοῦ θεοῦ** is a genitive of content, “the bowls containing the wrath of God.” The verb is a cultic term often used in the LXX for “pouring out” drink offerings to Yahweh (Exod. 30:18; Lev. 4:7, 18, 30; Num. 19:17) or the sprinkling of blood in the covenant rite (Exod. 24:6, 8). The image is used figuratively in Jeremiah’s prayer in Jer. 10:25 that God would “pour out [his] wrath on the nations” (cf. Ps. 69:24; Jer. 7:20; Zeph. 3:8), a prayer that could well be in the background here (so Sweet, Roloff, Giesen). This depiction of God pouring out wrath as a sacred libation is also seen in the sense that the “bowls” were used for drink offerings in the temple (see Rev. 15:7). Kraft (1974: 201) sees a special allusion to Lev. 26:18, 21, 24, 28, where God promises a sevenfold punishment on Israel if they refuse to obey his decrees: “If you remain hostile toward me and refuse to listen to me, I will multiply your afflictions seven times over, as your sins deserve” (26:21).

(2) First Bowl: Terrible Sores (16:2)

The wording “departed and was pouring out^[2] his bowl on the earth” reproduces the language of the command and continues the sense of the judgment as a drink offering to God. The focus is now **εἰς τὴν γῆν** (*eis tēn gēn*, on the earth), referring to the land and those who live on it (**γῆν** in 16:1 referred to the whole world and included the focus of all of the first four bowls). Unlike the seals and trumpets, the bowls affect all the earth-dwellers, but it is important to remember the basic theme that only those “who have the mark of the beast and worship his image” are punished in this way (see 3:10; 7:3–4; 9:4), building on the exodus motif that the people of God were spared from his outpouring of wrath (Exod. 8:22–23; 9:4, 6; 10:23; 11:7; 12:13; 19:5). This phrasing identifying the earth-dwellers as having the beast’s mark and worshiping his image also occurs in 14:11 and 20:4 and recapitulates the themes of chapter 13. They deserve judgment from God because of their allegiance to God’s supreme opponent.

The judgment that comes in this first bowl is **ἔλκος κακὸν καὶ πονηρόν** (*helkos kakon kai ponēron*, a bad and evil sore),^[3] replicating the sixth Egyptian plague in which terrible boils broke out on both people and animals (Exod. 9:9–11). These terrible, painful sores are similar to the sores that plagued Job in Job 2:1–13 (so Mounce 1998: 293; Wall 1991: 197), but here it is the unrighteous suffering them. A **ἔλκος** is an abscessed or ulcerous sore, often caused by infection, of the kind that Lazarus had in the parable of Luke 16:19–31 (cf. 16:21). The thought of such a plague in any literal sense is fearsome indeed. Medical supplies would be exhausted in a few days with such a universal disaster. Moreover, those inflicted would be unable to walk, sit, or lie down without pain, as anyone who has had a boil can attest.

(3) Second Bowl: Sea Turns to Blood (16:3)

At the second trumpet judgment (8:8–9), a burning mountain fell on the sea, and “a third of the sea became blood, and a third of the creatures that live in the sea died, and a third of the ships were destroyed.” This second bowl judgment is much more severe, and so we are told, **ἐγένετο αἷμα ὡς νεκροῦ, καὶ πᾶσα ψυχὴ ζωῆς ἀπέθανεν** (*egeneto haima hōs nekrou, kai pasa psychē zōēs apethanen*, it became blood like that of a corpse, and every living thing^[4] died). In the first Egyptian plague

(Exod. 7:14–21), the Nile was turned into blood and all the fish died. The emphasis here is greater, “every living thing.” As stated in Rev. 8:8, it is important to realize that the sea was the lifeblood of the Roman Empire. Not just food supplies but most commerce and trade depended on the sea lanes because Rome was in the southern boot of Italy, and land trade was limited. Thus, this was tantamount to the destruction of all civilization. In fact, each of the plagues would end civilization as we (or the Romans) know it. Such hyperbole/overkill is characteristic of apocalyptic. Beale (1999: 815) brings out these implications, linking it with both the economic connotations of the “mark of the beast” that deprived believers from “buying and selling” in 13:16–17 and the economic dissolution of Babylon the Great in 18:15–17, 19. It is possible that ψυχὴ ζωῆς can mean not only the life in the sea but also those people who make their living from the sea, though that is difficult because there is no hint that “every” sailor and ship captain died. Hence, it is likely that this refers only to all sea life. But that is devastating enough, for such a disaster would bring down our economic system today as well.

(4) Third Bowl: Inland Waters Turn to Blood (16:4)

This is closer (cf. 16:3) to the first Egyptian plague, which affected the Nile and its tributaries rather than the Mediterranean Sea. While there is nothing here about “all sea life died” as in the second bowl judgment, that is certainly implied. In the third trumpet judgment, a burning star fell on the waters, turning a third of them poisonous, with many deaths (8:10–11). As in the second bowl judgment, the terseness of the wording here makes the universal nature of the judgment all the more powerful. Instead of describing the effects of the judgment, it says simply, ἐγένετο αἷμα (*egeneto haima*, they became blood). As in 16:3, it probably also refers to a severe economic judgment that portends the destruction of civilization. Giesen (1997: 351) notes that this probably alludes to Ps. 78:44, “He turned their rivers to blood; they could not drink from their streams.” Revelation 16:6 says that this is divine retribution against the enemies of the saints.

(5) Doxological Hymn on Divine Justice (16:5–7)

Aune (1998a: 864–65, building on Deichgräber 1967: 56; see also Betz 1969: 139) calls this a “judgment doxology” that begins with an affirmation of the righteousness of God (Ps. 119:137; Jer. 12:1; Dan. 3:27 LXX; Tob. 3:2; Apoc. Mos. 27.5) and then focuses on the justice of divine punishment (Josh. 7:19–21; 2 Chron. 12:6; Ezra 9:15; Neh. 9:33; Ps. 7:11; 9:4; Jer. 46:28; 3 Macc. 2:3). The only problem is that there are no examples that combine the two elements apart from this one, so a form-critical designation is problematic. In 2 Chron. 12:6 and Neh. 9:33, the people declare the justice of God in a judgment context, but there is no hymn. The closest parallels are Ps. 7:11; 9:4, 8, where God “judges righteously” in destroying the wicked, but there does not seem to be a “judgment doxology” there. In reaction to the label “judgment doxology,” Staples (1972: 281) argues that this is not an apocalyptic motif but has a prophetic-theocratic origin and should be called a “vindication formula.” Yarbro Collins (1977: 369) responds that Staples overstates his case and that we have here an apocalyptic transformation of traditional forms that should be labeled an “eschatological vindication formula.” Yarbro Collins is largely correct, but it is still questionable how extensively “traditional forms” have been followed. Aune (1998a: 885) notes correctly that it is not so much a literary form as a “theological motif.” The purpose in this context is theodicy (see Osborne 1993: 63–77), upholding the justice of God in pouring out his judgment on the evildoers.^[5]

The angel that poured out the third bowl on the inland waters and springs is designated “the

angel of the waters” in 16:5. This is a common apocalyptic motif in which angels control the natural elements (1 Enoch 60.11–24; 61.10; 66.1–2; 69.22; Jub. 2.2), paralleling Rev. 7:1 (the angels controlling the four winds) and 14:18 (the angel in charge of the fire). While this is primarily the angel that poured out the third bowl, it would also include the second bowl as a water judgment. Betz (1969: 139–40) believes that an earlier form of this tradition focused on the centrality of the four elements (earth, air, fire, and water) for the trumpets and bowls, and that this formed the basis of the hymn.^[6] However, Aune (1998a: 865–66, following Yarbrow Collins 1977: 367–81) has shown that such a theory is artificial and does not fit the text as we have it. The four elements are certainly seen in the trumpets and bowls, but they are not formative. Instead, the Egyptian plagues are the controlling image, and in 16:5–7 the justice of God, rather than the four elements, predominates.

The angel first sings, ΔΙΚΑΙΟΣ Εἶ (*Dikaïos ei*, You are righteous), which has a double meaning in that God is both “righteous” (his holiness) and “just” (his justice) in his judgments. In the passages cited above, one can see that an ongoing theme in the OT is the “rightness” of God’s judgment of his people and the nations. The ways of God are called ΔΙΚΑΙΟΙ in 15:3, as are his judgments in 16:7 and 19:2. The judgment of the nations is the product of the holiness and righteousness of God, and thus they are “just and true” (15:3; 16:7; 19:2). God is called a “righteous judge” in Ps. 7:11; 9:8; 67:4; 75:2; Isa. 11:4; Jer. 11:20; 2 Tim. 4:8; 2 Macc. 12:6, and Revelation builds on this theme.

The divine title that follows repeats that of Rev. 11:17, ὁ ὢν καὶ ὁ ἦν (*ho ōn kai ho ēn*, who is and who was). The threefold title of 1:4, 8; 4:8 (“the one who is, who was, and who is to come”) has been altered (there is no longer an “is to come”) because the final act of God has been inaugurated, and the future is here. Beale (1999: 817, as in 11:17) argues that ὁ ὅσιος (*ho hosios*, the holy one) has been substituted for the third element, and that the “holiness” of God is seen in the clause that follows, ὅτι ταῦτα ἔκρινας (*hoti tauta ekrinas*, because you have judged these things).^[7] In 11:17 the future has arrived in that God’s kingdom has begun, while here the future has arrived in that divine judgment has begun. This is linked with the last judgment, not in the sense that it is synonymous with the great white throne judgment of 20:11–14, but because this final set of judgments launches the events that constitute the eschaton. Note that 11:17 is part of the seventh trumpet and that 16:5 is part of the bowl judgments. In other words, we are at the eschaton (see §III.A.2 “Opening the Seals [6:1–8:1]” for the cyclical nature of the seals, trumpets, and bowls).

God is also called “holy” in 15:4, and these are the only occurrences of the title in the Apocalypse. The normal term is ἅγιος (*hagios*, holy, 24 times in the book), but the two are synonymous in meaning. The use of ὅσιος here may be due to a special connection with 15:4 (both may go back to the Song of Moses in Deut. 32:4), and it refers to the fact that God is set apart and stands above the events of this world. As seen in the use of the threefold formula in 1:4, 8; and 4:8, God is sovereign over history, and his great judgment is part of that. Some (Beale 1999: 817; Aune 1998a: 885–86) note how “righteous” and “holy” are paired in Deut. 32:4 and elsewhere (Ps. 145:17; Jer. 38:23 LXX; Ps. Sol. 10.5; 1 Enoch 25.4; 104.12) and believe that they are virtual synonyms here.^[8] God’s “righteousness” is part of his “holiness,” and both are exemplified in his just “judgment” of the nations. The meaning of ταῦτα looks ahead to the sins described in 16:6, ^[9] namely the murder of God’s people, but may also include all the sins described in the book (summed up in 21:8).

A second ὅτι clause in 16:6 expands the judgment of 16:5b and identifies explicitly what “these things” were that caused God’s mighty hand to fall upon the nations. This is not a separate reason but clarifies the more ambiguous reason of verse 5b. The judgment came because αἷμα ἁγίων καὶ

προλητῶν ἐξέχεαν (*haima hagion kai prophētōn exechean*, they have poured out the blood of the saints and prophets). This is another example of *lex talionis* (the law of retribution) in Revelation. The verb is the same as that describing the angels “pouring out” the bowls in 16:1, 2, 3, 4, 8, 10, 12, 17 and heightens the sense of divine justice. They “poured out” the blood of God’s servants, so God is “pouring out” judgment on them. The particular mention of “the saints and prophets” parallels 18:24 (cf. 17:6), where the destruction of Babylon the Great is linked to her shedding “the blood of the prophets and saints.” Jesus used the murder of the prophets as a reason for divine judgment in Matt. 23:31, 37 (cf. Matt. 5:11–12) and implied it in the parable of the wicked tenants in Mark 12:3–5 par. The theme is also found in Acts 7:52; Rom. 11:3; 1 Thess. 2:15; and Heb. 11:35–37. The early church believed their suffering was a sharing not only of the suffering of Jesus but also of that of the prophets.^[10] The order can be explained by those (Beckwith, Mounce, Thomas) who point out that ἁγίων is the general term, and προλητῶν refers to a particular group among them. The whole people of God, and in particular the prophets among them, were martyred by the earth-dwellers.

There is also a further connection with 6:9–11. The martyrs who implored God to vindicate their deaths are now being explicitly answered. Since the nations shed their blood, God will now αἷμα αὐτοῖς [δ]έδωκας πιεῖν (*haima autois [d]edōkas piein*, give them blood to drink), meaning that the persecutors will have to drink the blood of the seas and the rivers as retribution for the blood they shed.^[11] In Isa. 49:26 God told Israel, “I will make your oppressors eat their own flesh; they will be drunk on their own blood.” This is also linked to the first Egyptian plague as judgment on the Egyptians for shedding the blood of the Israelites. Wisdom 11:15–16 interprets the plagues as divine justice: “In return for their foolish and wicked thoughts . . . you sent upon them a multitude of irrational creatures to punish them, so that they might learn that one is punished by the very things by which one sins.” Psalm 79:3 says of the oppressors, “They have poured out blood like water,” and then pleads, “Pay back into the laps of our neighbors seven times the reproach they have hurled at you, O LORD” (79:12; cf. Isa. 49:26; 65:6; Jer. 32:18). Thus, the angel concludes by saying, ἄξιοί εἰσιν (*axioi eisin*, they are worthy), which means that the persecutors deserve such just retribution. There may well be a deliberate contrast between the ἄξιος of the sinners here and that of the faithful Sardinians in Rev. 3:4, who “will walk with [Christ], wearing white, for they are worthy” (contra Mounce 1998: 295). The faithful deserve the exalted robe of victory in the same way that the unfaithful deserve divine punishment.

The altar now responds by affirming the justice of God’s response (16:7). Yet it is not the personified altar itself that speaks (as R. Charles, Kraft, Roloff, Mounce, and Giesen believe), for the genitive τοῦ θυσιαστηρίου (*tou thysiastēriou*, of the altar) presupposes a voice, “(one) from the altar.” In 6:9 the saints under the altar cry out for vengeance, so it is fitting that the voice now comes from the altar. Thus, some (Aune 1998a: 888; Beale 1999: 820) think this is the voice of the martyred saints crying out. But this is very similar to “the voice from the horns of the altar” in 9:13, and there the voice is more likely the angel who presented the prayers of the saints to God in 8:3–5 than the martyrs themselves.

The voice affirms the rightness of the angel’s hymn in 16:6 with an emphatic ναί (*nai*, yes), which always appears in Revelation (1:7; 14:13; 22:20) in confirmation of divine truth. The title “Lord God Almighty” repeats that of the Song of Moses in 15:3 (as well as in 1:8; 4:8; 11:17; 15:3; 16:14; 19:6, 15; 21:22) and in many ways is the primary title for God in the book, affirming him as the omnipotent divine warrior and the Lord of the universe. It is this all-powerful God who has carried out his judgment on the persecutors. Also, in 15:3 the saints sing out “Just and true (δίκαιαι καὶ ἀληθιναί) are your ways,” and here the order is reversed as the voice from the altar affirms, ἀληθινὰ καὶ

δικαίαι αἱ κρίσεις σου (*alēthinai kai dikaiai hai kriseis sou*, your judgments are true and just), an affirmation that is reproduced in the “hallelujah” hymns of 19:1–6. All of this is based on the Song of Moses in Deut. 32:4 LXX, “His works are true and all his ways are just.” Also, the vindication formula of 16:5 began with the affirmation, “You are righteous . . . because you have judged,” so the antiphonal response adds an affirmation of the “truth” of those judgments. Revelation never uses ἀλήθεια (*alētheia*, truth) but has the adjective ἀληθινός ten times: Christ and God are called “holy and true” (3:7; 6:10), and Christ is called “faithful and true” (3:14; 19:11). Then the words of God revealed through John are “true” (19:9) or “faithful and true” (21:5; 22:6). Finally, the ways and justice of God are “true and just” in the passages noted above (15:3; 16:7; 19:2). It is clear that the “true” nature of the words, ways, and judgment of God are based on his nature as “true.” As Bultmann (*TDNT* 1:249) has said, this is built on the OT concept of אֱמֶת (*emet*, faithfulness; often translated ἀληθινός in the LXX, e.g., Exod. 34:6), which means trustworthy or reliable and when used of God refers to his covenant faithfulness. In Revelation ἀληθινός is always used of God or Christ, and it refers both to their covenant faithfulness and to the absolute reliability of their deeds and judgments.

(6) Fourth Bowl: The Sun Scorches People (16:8–9)

This is the only one of the first five bowls not based on an Egyptian plague. Elsewhere in the Apocalypse the sun is a symbol of majesty, as Christ (1:16) and the mighty angel (10:1) have faces like the sun, and the woman is clothed with the sun (12:1). It is also an apocalyptic symbol, part of the storm theophany in 6:12 and darkened in the locust plague of 9:2. Finally, the people of God are protected from its power to inflict harm. In the New Jerusalem, there will be no more sun (21:23; 22:5), and the saints will never again experience the sun’s scorching heat (7:16). In the fourth trumpet (8:12) and the fourth bowl here, the sun is directly involved in God’s judgment on the sinners. In 8:12 the sun along with the moon and stars is darkened, but this is the opposite reaction. There the sun’s light was taken away, while here its fiery power is intensified beyond anything imaginable. Now we have a massive solar flare or a mini-nova as God gives (another use of ἐδόθη, *edothē*, was given [by God]; see 6:2, 4, 8, et al.) the sun power to καυματίσαι τοὺς ἀνθρώπους ἐν πυρί (*kaumatissai tous anthrōpous en pyri*, burn people^[12] with fire). This reverses the promise to the saints in 7:16 that they will never again experience the sun’s “scorching heat,”^[13] for now the persecutors will be “scorched” by the sun. In the OT the sun’s “scorching heat” is used in God’s judgment of Jehoiakim in Jer. 36:30 and in the affliction of Job in Job 30:21, 30; cf. Jer. 17:8. The literal picture here is not simply one of massive sunburns but of actual tongues of fire “burning people.” As stated elsewhere, the issue of literal or symbolic interpretation cannot be decided (i.e., we will find out whether this will literally happen when the events of the eschaton occur; until then, we are not meant to know), but the reader is supposed to think of the literal image behind the metaphor and feel the horrifying power of the picture. This image is terrible indeed!

However, more terrible than the judgment inflicted upon the earth-dwellers is their reaction to God’s just recompense (16:9). As they are “scorched by its intense heat” (a cognate accusative, lit., “burned with a great burning”), they respond not with repentance but instead ἐβλασλήμῃσαν τὸ ὄνομα τοῦ θεοῦ (*eblasphēmēsan to onoma tou theou*, they blasphemed the name of God). Fire is the basic weapon of judgment in the book. First, Christ is described as having “eyes like blazing fire” in 1:14 and 2:18. The trumpet judgments began with a burning censer hurled to earth (8:5), and three

of the trumpet judgments involved fire (8:7, 8; 9:17–18). The two witnesses “devoured” their enemies with fire (11:5), and Babylon the Great will be “consumed with fire” (18:8). Finally, the enemies of God will be thrown into eternal fire (14:10; 19:20; 20:10, 14–15; 21:8). Thus, this bowl judgment is a particularly severe warning, and when the people of earth reject that warning, their guilt is especially obvious.

Βλασφημέω occurs in only two passages in the book: in 13:6 of the beast being allowed to “blaspheme God” and here (16:9, 11, 21). The persecutors are participating in the blasphemy of the Antichrist. Blasphemy in the Apocalypse is to slander God’s holy name through idolatry (especially in worshiping the beast) and to mock his name through rejection. Moreover, this is the very God who “has authority over the plagues,” so as in 9:20–21 the outpouring of judgment leads to absolute rejection of the God who proved his power and justice in the plague judgments. Also in keeping with 9:20–21, they οὐ μετενόησαν δοῦναι αὐτῷ δόξαν (*ou metenoēsan dounai autō doxan*, did not repent so as to give^[14] him glory). Yarbrow Collins (1977: 371) believes that the refusal to repent in 16:9, 11 is predetermined by God and points to 22:10–11 as evidence that the time to repent is past. That is not the situation in this context, however, for “give him glory” is seen as the virtual definition of repentance/conversion. In 14:7 the angel in midair called on the nations to “fear God and give him glory,” and in 11:13, after the great earthquake, many among the nations did “give glory to the God of heaven” (see also 15:4). Since “give him glory” signifies conversion, the earth-dwellers here once again refuse to turn to the God of mercy and find redemption.

ii. Bowl Plagues Poured out on the Beast’s Throne (16:10–21)

(1) Fifth Bowl: The Beast’s Throne in Darkness and Pain (16:10–11)

Τὸν θρόνον τοῦ θηρίου (*ton thronon tou thēriou*, throne of the beast) is anchored in 13:2, where the dragon gives the beast “his power and his throne and great authority” (see 2:13 for “the throne of Satan”). But this is the only place in the book where the Antichrist’s “throne” is mentioned, and it is contrasted to the “voice from the throne [of God]” that exclaims, “It is finished” in 16:17. The message is clear: the beast has limited authority, and his throne is temporary and soon to be overwhelmed by the act of God. There is another contrast between the short-lived βασιλεία (*basileia*, kingdom) of the beast and the saints who have been made “a kingdom and priests to serve [Christ’s] God and Father” in 1:6 and 5:10. Soon “the kingdom of this world [will] become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ” (11:15; cf. 12:10). The readers of John’s day would have seen this throne and kingdom to be the Roman Empire, so we are to think of the Antichrist’s reign as the revival of an unholy Roman empire.

The preliminary act in overturning his reign is to “plunge his kingdom into darkness,”^[15] building on the ninth Egyptian plague of total darkness covering Egypt for three days (Exod. 10:21–29; again the Israelites were spared and had light, 10:23b). It also intensifies the fourth trumpet judgment in which the sun, moon, and stars were “darkened” for a third of the day and night (Rev. 8:12). Now the “darkness” is complete, as in Exod. 10:21, “a darkness that can be felt,” and Exod. 10:23, “No one could see anyone else or leave his place for three days.” In the ancient world, darkness meant many things—sin, ignorance, danger, judgment, and death—but the ones that have greatest relevance for Revelation are judgment and death.^[16] In Exod. 10 the plague of darkness was directed against the Egyptian sun god Ra, to show that God, not Ra, was in control. The day of Yahweh was to be “darkness, not light” (Amos 5:20; cf. 8:9; 1 Sam. 2:9; Isa. 8:22; Joel 2:2, 10, 31). Also, darkness is used to describe the place of final judgment where there will be “weeping

and gnashing of teeth” (Matt. 8:12; 22:13; 25:30; Luke 13:28; 2 Pet. 2:17; Jude 13; 1 Enoch 17.6; Ps. Sol. 14.9; 1QS 4.11–13). In Revelation “darkness” occurs only in 8:12 (the sun darkened) and 9:2 (the sun and sky darkened by the smoke from the abyss) apart from this passage, so darkness always refers to judgment. Yet here the darkness produces torment, as ἔμασῶντο τὰς γλῶσσας αὐτῶν ἐκ τοῦ πόνου (*emasōnto tas glōssas autōn ek tou ponou*, they bit their tongues because^[17] of the pain), and that is unusual because darkness does not normally produce pain. Most likely the torment is connected with darkness primarily in the “weeping and gnashing of teeth” in eternal hellfire (Matt. 8:12 and the other passages above). In Louw and Nida (1988: 1:254), the two expressions “gnashing of teeth” and “biting their tongues” are virtual synonyms for the agony of intense suffering. Thus, the probable reason for the association of darkness and terrible pain here is to link this judgment with the suffering of the eternal punishment to come (Rev. 14:10–11; 20:13–15). Beale (1999: 824) points out that Wis. 17 interpreted the darkness of the ninth plague as denoting the exile of the Egyptians from God’s providence (Wis. 17:2) and the eternal darkness of hell awaiting them (Wis. 17:21; cf., also Exod. Rab. 14.2).

Yet again (Rev. 16:11; cf. v. 9), the sinners ἐβλασλήμῃσαν τὸν θεὸν τοῦ οὐρανοῦ (*eblasphēmēsan ton theon tou ouranou*, blasphemed the God of heaven). As Pharaoh continually hardened his heart against God with each successive plague, so the earth-dwellers become more and more obdurate in their rejection of God as the judgments continue. They curse God “because of their pains and their sores.” The sores were inflicted in the first bowl judgment (16:2), so this is a summary of the preceding judgments, meaning they curse him for all the bowl judgments they had endured (so also Kraft 1974: 207). Instead of repenting (a major purpose of the seals, trumpets, and bowls), they reject God all the more; this is further proof of their total depravity. The title “God of heaven” is frequent in the OT, especially in Ezra (1:2; 5:11, 12; 6:9, 10; 7:12, 21, 23), Nehemiah (1:4, 5; 2:4, 20), and Daniel (2:18, 19, 37, 44), to describe the God who is sovereign over heaven and earth. Interestingly, there is a contrast between its occurrences in Rev. 11:13 and 16:11. In 11:13 some among the nations “give glory to the God of heaven,” which I argued means they are converted, while here the direct opposite occurs as the earth-dwellers “blasphemed the God of heaven.” In both instances, the “God of heaven” is sovereign, displaying mercy (11:13) and judgment (16:10–11). This is a key issue in the book, going back to 1:7, where Zech. 12:10 is quoted: “All the peoples of the earth will mourn because of him.” I argued that 1:7 has a double meaning, referring to some mourning for sin (the meaning in Zechariah) and others mourning in judgment (the thrust often in the Apocalypse). The same contrast is seen in the portrait of the nations as the source of many converts (5:9; 7:9; 15:4; 21:24) and yet as rejecting God (10:11; 13:7; 17:15). Here we are at the heart of its message to its readers—choose you this day whom you will serve!

In addition to cursing God, they refuse to repent ἐκ τῶν ἔργων αὐτῶν (*ek tōn ergōn autōn*, of their deeds). There are two other occurrences of this idea in the book: 2:22, where the followers of the cult leader Jezebel are warned of intense suffering from God “unless they repent of her works,” and 9:20, where the earth-dwellers refused to “repent of the work of their hands.” In all cases the ἔργων are evil deeds; the deeds are spelled out in 9:20–21: worshiping demons and idols, murder, sorcery, immorality, and stealing. In 16:11 this would particularly refer to worshiping the beast (cf. 15:2–4) and murdering the saints (cf. 16:5–6).

(2) Sixth Bowl: Preparation for Final War (16:12–16)

There are four parts to this section, beginning with the bowl itself (16:12), then a type of interlude (16:13–16) made up of three parts: the reaction of the false trinity as they gather the nations for the

final battle (vv. 13–14), an excursus warning the readers of the imminent return of Christ (v. 15), and a return to the scene of verses 13–14, as the kings are gathered for Armageddon (v. 16).

(a) Euphrates Dries Up (16:12)

The sixth bowl somewhat parallels the sixth trumpet in which four angels bound at the Euphrates are released, resulting in the demonic horsemen slaughtering a third of the world's population (9:13–19). Here the Euphrates ἐξηράνθη (*exēranthē*, was dried up), a miracle paralleling the drying up of the Red Sea so Israel could cross to safety (Exod. 14:21–22). Also, Josh. 3:13–17 and 4:23 tell of God drying up the Jordan so the Israelites could enter the Promised Land. Isaiah saw in the Red Sea crossing a prophecy that in the end times the Euphrates would dry up and allow the remnant to escape their enemies (Isa. 11:15–16; 44:27; 50:2; 51:10; cf. Jer. 51:36; Zech. 10:11; 2 Esdr. [4 Ezra] 13:39–47), a prophecy partially fulfilled when Cyrus (Isa. 44:28; Jer. 50:38; 51:36) diverted the Euphrates, crossed the river, and captured Babylon.^[18] The Euphrates, the largest river in that part of the world, was the eastern boundary for both the land God gave Israel (Gen. 15:18; Deut. 1:7–8; Josh. 1:4) as well as for the Roman Empire, separating them from the feared Parthians (see on Rev. 6:2).

The demonic horsemen of 9:13–19 are replaced by “the kings of the east” (lit., “from the rising of the sun”). There are many interpretations of what this signifies. (1) Some (Walvoord, Seiss, Thomas) take this literally as a reference to the drying up of the Euphrates, so that a coalition of oriental rulers can join the “kings of the whole earth” (16:14) in persecuting the saints; (2) Ford and Chilton historicize this as a Parthian invasion of Rome; (3) others (R. Charles, Beasley-Murray, Krodel, Mounce, Giesen) see the Parthians as background for this but believe the kings from the east go to war against the kings of the whole world, preparing for the destruction of the unholy Roman empire in chapters 17–18; (4) Beale (1999: 827) universalizes the imagery, seeing Cyrus and his allies as the kings from the East escalated into the kings of the earth (16:14) and then escalated further to Gog and Magog (see 20:8) to describe the woes of the whole interadvent period.

Several issues are inherent to the discussion. It is unlikely that this means literally a drying up of the Euphrates at the end of history, because throughout the book water is used figuratively, and in the modern world the Euphrates would no longer have that kind of strategic place. Also, Isaiah and Jeremiah (above) saw the drying up of the Red Sea as a symbol, and it is likely John has done the same here. A more difficult question is whether the “kings of the east” go to war with the “kings of the whole earth” or join the coalition. Is the war against Rome or against the believers? Does it anticipate the destruction of Babylon the Great or continue the war against the saints from chapter 13? On the whole, it is more likely that the drying of the Euphrates allows the Parthians to join the coalition of kings behind Rome (as was the desire during the reign of Domitian; see Aune 1998a: 891–94). If the Nero redivivus legend is behind this (see on 13:3a), the civil war theme would be likely. But there is no hint in 16:12–16 that such is the intended thrust, so it is better to see the kings from the east coalescing into the kings of the whole earth and preparing for Armageddon (16:14, 16; so Ladd 1972: 213). Thus, as in Ezek. 38–39, the war of Gog and Magog against the people of God (see Rev. 19:17 and 20:8 for this imagery) forms the background. As with Gog and Magog, the natural barriers between nations and tribes are disappearing, and there is a one-world government centering on the beast. In this sense, the drying up is the antithesis of the drying of the Red Sea, as the saints are attacked rather than delivered.

(b) False Trinity Gathers Kings for Final Battle (16:13–14)

The false trinity finally reacts to the divine judgments poured out upon their followers. Here the three are combined for the first time. The dragon, Satan, appears in Rev. 12:3ff. as the antagonist to the woman and the child. The beast from the sea/Antichrist appears in chapter 13 and receives his throne and authority from the dragon. The beast from the earth is called “the false prophet” to indicate the counterfeit miracles and prophecies that characterize him (13:13–14; 16:14; 19:20; 20:10). As a false prophet, he “deceives” (13:14; 19:20) the nations and seduces them into following Satan. He also leads the “great apostasy” of so-called believers in Mark 13:6, 22 and parallels; and 2 Thess. 2:3. **Ψευδοπροφήται** (*pseudoprophētai*, false prophets) were predicted by Jesus as signs of the end of the age (Matt. 24:11, 24). In 2 Pet. 2:1 they are “false teachers,” and in 1 John 4:3 they are called “antichrists.” The early church believed that false teachers/prophets were harbingers of the final Antichrist and false prophet who would bring this age to a close. These three evil beings form a parody or imitation of the divine Trinity. Out of their mouths (note the contrast with Christ, out of whose mouth comes a sharp sword in 1:16; 19:15) come **πνεύματα τρία ἀκάθαρτα ὡς βάτραχοι** (*pneumata tria akatharta hōs batrachoi*, three unclean spirits like frogs). As stated in 1:16, the mouth in the ancient world symbolized royal proclamation, and here the false trinity sends out its messengers with its deceptive message. The false prophet has been called the “Minister of Propaganda” for the Antichrist (Bruce 1986: 1616), and so these three spirits are part of his propaganda campaign. In the Gospels (Mark especially), **πνεύματα ἀκάθαρτα** was a common term for demons (e.g., Mark 1:23, 26–27; 3:11, 30; 5:2, 8, 13) to emphasize their impurity. Thus, these are demonic messengers. The “unclean” aspect is stressed even more when they are described as “like frogs,” an unclean creature in the Torah (Lev. 11:10–11). Frogs also remind one of the second Egyptian plague (Exod. 8:1–15), so these beings may in a sense be seen as a pestilence upon the earth, deceiving the nations and thus leading them into the judgment of God.

The demonic aspect is brought out explicitly when they are called **πνεύματα δαιμονίων** (*pneumata daimoniōn*, spirits of demons) in 16:14, with **δαιμονίων** being exegetical, “spirits who are demons” (or perhaps adjectival, “demonic spirits”), thus making “unclean spirits” clear for readers unfamiliar with the phrase. Behind the political opposition and religious blasphemy of both the Roman Empire of John’s day and the beast’s empire at the end of history are demonic forces leading the pagans into worshiping the wrong gods. They accomplish this by **ποιοῦντα σημεῖα** (*poionta sēmeia*, doing signs). These signs are spelled out more explicitly in 13:13–15 (“He was given power to give breath to the image of the beast”) and 19:20 (“the false prophet who had done the signs” and “deceived those who had the mark of the beast”). They were the counterfeit miracles that caused the nations to worship the beast. Beale (1999: 834) links this further with the plague of frogs, because they affected the kings first (Exod. 8:3–4; cf. Ps. 105:30 LXX). In the OT, God at times sent out “lying spirits” to deceive evil kings, as with Ahab (1 Kings 22:19–23; cf. Ezek. 14:9). In the NT, false prophets and teachers also led the people astray (Mark 13:22 par.; 2 Thess. 2:9–10 [“counterfeit miracles, signs and wonders”]; 2 Pet. 2:1–2 [“destructive heresies”]).

These demonic spirits “go out” (from the mouths of the false trinity) to **τοὺς βασιλεῖς τῆς οἰκουμένης ὅλης** (*tous basileis tēs oikoumenēs holēs*, the kings of the whole earth). **Οἰκουμένη** always appears with **ὅλος** in Revelation (3:10; 12:9; 16:14) and is virtually synonymous with the “earth-dwellers” (see on 12:9). Thus, this expands “the kings of the east” to refer to all the world. This event is the same as 13:3–4, 14, in which the entire world joins in worshiping the beast (cf. “the whole world” in v. 3 and “the inhabitants of the earth” in v. 14). These are the “kings of the earth”

who commit adultery with the great prostitute (17:2) and reign under her rule (17:18). They are the “ten horns” of 17:12–14 who “give their power and authority to the beast” (17:13).

The purpose of the demonic mission is συναγαγεῖν αὐτοὺς εἰς τὸν πόλεμον (*synagagein autous eis ton polemon*, to gather them for the battle). This is the common phrase in Revelation for the preparation for cosmic war (also 19:19; 20:8; see on 20:7–10 for whether there is one battle or two). The articular τὸν πόλεμον concretizes this to mean “the war,” namely Armageddon (16:16). This end-of-the-world battle was predicted in the OT (Ezek. 38–39; Zech. 12–14; Joel 2:11; 3:2), early Jewish literature (1 Enoch 56.7–8; 90.15–19; 94.9–11; T. Dan 5.10–11; 2 Esdr. [4 Ezra] 13:33–39), and the NT (2 Thess. 2:8), so in a sense the use of the definite article points back to the final battle predicted by the prophets. The battle itself is described further as “the great day of God Almighty,” similar to Rev. 6:17, where it is depicted as “the great day of their [God’s and the Lamb’s] wrath.” It is a “great day” because it culminates the plan of God that existed “from before the creation of the world” (Matt. 25:34; Eph. 1:4; Heb. 4:3; Rev. 13:8; 17:8). It is then that “God Almighty” will show his sovereignty and bring this age to an end, when he “takes his great power and begins to reign” (11:17). The battle will be over in a millisecond when the sword comes out of the mouth of Christ (19:15a) and annihilates his enemies (14:20; 19:15b, 21).

(c) Parenthesis—Warning from Christ (16:15)

In light of the gathering of the forces of evil in 16:13–14, the people of God are facing an unparalleled danger. Alertness is desperately needed. Thus, as in 21:7–8, the narration is interrupted in order to address the readers and warn them of the dangers of failing to persevere.^[19] The first-person exhortation is intended to be a message from the Lamb of God himself. Christ here warns, Ἰδοὺ ἔρχομαι ὡς κλέπτης (*Idou erchomai hōs kleptēs*, Behold, I am going to come like a thief), with the futuristic present guaranteeing the Lord’s soon return. As in 3:3, the image of Christ “coming like a thief” follows the NT theme (Matt. 24:43; 1 Thess. 5:2–4; 2 Pet. 3:10) of Christ’s returning at an unexpected time and finding his people unprepared for his arrival. The image is that of terrible loss and the need for constant vigilance for his coming.

It is spiritual vigilance that dominates this third of seven beatitudes (1:3; 14:13; 16:15; 19:9; 20:6; 22:7, 14) in the book. The language is taken from the letters to the two most endangered churches, Sardis and Laodicea. Like Sardis (3:2–3), God will bless only ὁ γρηγορῶν (*ho grēgorōn*, lit., “the one who stays awake”). As stated in 3:2, γρηγορῶν pictures the spiritual sloth of Sardis and is often used in the NT to depict the spiritual watchfulness necessary to be ready for Christ’s return (Mark 13:35, 37; Matt. 24:42; 25:13; Luke 12:36–38; 1 Thess. 5:6), and here it is linked to heavenly reward. From the letter to Laodicea (3:18), the second spiritual need is τηρῶν τὰ ἱμάτια αὐτοῦ (*tērōn ta himatia autou*, lit., “keep his clothes on”). In Laodicea they needed to switch their sumptuous earthly clothes for “white garments to cover your shameful nakedness.” Here they need to “keep on” their garments, a strange metaphor that may have the idea of “keeping” or guarding one’s spiritual commitment to Christ. While some say the picture is of those who guard their garments lest they be lost or stolen (Farrer 1964: 177–78; Mounce 1998: 300–301), it is better to see this as picturing a person who stays awake and fully clothed in readiness for Christ’s return (so Bauckham 1993b: 109–10; Beale 1999: 837).

The danger of failing to keep their spiritual garments on is of “walking around naked and shamefully exposed.” This idea is similar to 3:18, where “shameful nakedness” pictures the sinful church “exposed” by God, continuing an OT image in which nakedness is a symbol of judgment (Isa. 20:1–4; Ezek. 16:36; 23:10, 29), and “shame” means to be disgraced and liable to judgment. For

the Jews nakedness was shameful (as in Isa. 20:4; Ezek. 16:36; 23:29). This is the picture here as well. In Isa. 20 Isaiah went about “stripped and barefoot” as a prophetic parable of the judgment God would inflict in “stripping” Egypt and Cush of their dignity and power. In Ezek. 23 Israel is an adulterous wife about to be handed over to Assyria to be stripped naked for her idolatry. In Rev. 6:11 the faithful martyrs are given white robes to wear, and in 19:8 the “fine linen, bright and clean” worn by the bride of the Lamb is identified as “righteous deeds.” As some point out (Mounce 1998: 300, from Bruce 1969: 657), a member of the temple police caught asleep had his clothes stripped and burned, and he was sent off naked and in disgrace.

(d) Kings Gathered to Armageddon (16:16)

In 16:13–14 we were told how the kings are gathered (by the false trinity). This verse gives the place to which they are gathered. Thus, this returns to the narrative of 16:13–14 after the parenthetical warning of 16:15. The singular *συνήγαγεν* (*synēgagen*, he gathered) is probably due to the neuter *πνεύματα* (*pneumata*, spirits [of demons]) in 16:14 (since neuter plural nouns sometimes take singular verbs) and should be rendered “they gathered them together.” There have been many interpretations of “the place called in Hebrew Ἀρμαγεδών [*Harmagedōn*, Armageddon].”^[20] Megiddo is the ancient city in northern Palestine on a strategic part of the plain in the Valley of Jezreel or Esdraelon. It was the site of many famous battles in antiquity, including those of Pharaoh Thutmose III against the Canaanites in 1468 B.C., of Deborah and Barak against the Canaanites in Judg. 4–5, of Gideon against the Midianites in Judg. 7, and of Saul against the Philistines in 1 Sam. 31. It was also the place where Josiah died in battle (2 Kings 23:29–30).

The author wants to make sure the reader sees the Ἑβραϊστί (*Hebraisti*, Hebrew) symbol behind “Armageddon.” The natural meaning from the Hebrew would be “mountain (הַר, *har*) of Megiddo,” but there is no Mount Megiddo. There is only a city and a plain. With this in mind, some of the many possible meanings are:

A. Geographically based interpretations

1. This is a larger reference to the region, including the hills surrounding the plain and combining Megiddo (the site of many biblical battles) with Mount Carmel (the nearest mountain and the site of the defeat of the prophets of Baal) (Farrer, Shea, Chilton). But that is a rather large area for this small reference, and there is too little evidence for this.
2. It is a literal reference to Megiddo, since the city was built on a seventy-foot-high tell. Thus, it refers to the actual site of the final battle of history (Walvoord 1966: 238–39). Thomas (1995: 268–70) combines these first two options. The one problem is how an army the size of the one described here could consider fighting a battle in so confined an area.
3. It refers to Mount Carmel near Megiddo, thus a reference to the region (Lohmeyer 1926: 133–34), but that is too obscure for people of Asia who would be unaware of so subtle a designation (so Johnson 1981: 551–52), and Mount Carmel is never called Mount Megiddo in the Bible (so Krodel 1989: 287).
4. It is loosely derived from מְגִדּוֹן (*ḥr mēgiddōn*, city of Megiddo), thus a reference not to a mountain but to the city itself (R. Charles, Aune). But again, this is a conjectural emendation that can only be a vague possibility.

B. Etymologically based interpretations (taking this as a symbol similar to the use of “in Hebrew” for

the angel of the abyss in 9:11)

1. The Hebrew behind it is הַר מוֹעֵד (*har mō'ed*, mountain of assembly), and so refers to Mount Zion or the throne of God, which the king of Babylon in his arrogance tries to ascend in Isa. 14:12–14 (Rissi; Boring; Loasby; Jeremias *TDNT* 1:468; Kline 1996). But that demands an emendation of the text without any manuscript evidence.
2. It refers to the Hebrew etymology behind the $\mu\alpha\gamma\epsilon\delta\acute{\omega}\nu$ (*magedōn*), namely גָּדָד (*gādad*), which in noun form with הַר can mean either “marauding mountain,” a variation of Jeremiah’s “destroying mountain” (Jer. 51:25) and another name for Babylon (Caird, Kiddle, LaRondelle), or a place “to gather in troops for battle” (a secondary meaning of גָּדָד), thus a further allusion to the gathering of the nations for the final battle (Joel 3:2, 12) (Johnson 1981: 551–52).
3. The etymology behind the text has been slightly corrupted, and the actual Hebrew is הַר מִגְדוֹ (*har migdō*), the fruitful mountain, a reference to Jerusalem as the scene of the final battle (Joel 3:2; Zech. 14:2). R. Charles connects this with the background of Gog and Magog (see Rev. 20:8–10) in Ezek. 38:8, 21 and 39:2, 4, 17 for the final battle in Palestine.
4. It is loosely associated with an ancient myth of the battle of the gods with a mythological mountain (Gunkel 1921).

All these attempts to find a specific meaning for “Armageddon,” whether literal or symbolic, fail to convince. It is more likely that a more general reference is intended, building on the OT connection of Megiddo with warfare (so Lohse, Beasley-Murray, Giesen, Mounce). As Beale (1999: 840) states, this refers to “the defeat of kings who oppress God’s people (Judg. 5:19–21), the destruction of false prophets (1 Kings 18:40), the death of misled kings, which led to mourning (2 Kings 23:29–30; 2 Chron. 35:20–25), and the expectation, in direct connection with the one ‘whom they have pierced,’ of a future destruction of ‘all the nations that come against Jerusalem’ and mourning by all Israel’s tribes (Zech. 12:9–14).” The background is also the Gog-Magog tradition of Ezek. 38–39 depicting the final war with the enemies of God. Day (1994) argues that Zech. 12:11 is the specific reference behind “Armageddon,” in which the people of Israel mourn for the one they have pierced (12:10). It may be an overstatement to say it is the specific reference behind Armageddon here, but it is the only place in the OT where the Hebrew agrees with the Greek spelling, so it is at least a major reference behind the text. The force would be that those who stand against God (broadening apostate Israel to depict all the nations, a method used often in the Apocalypse) will mourn as they face God’s judgment.

(3) Seventh Bowl—Cosmic Judgment (16:17–21)

As Lohmeyer (1926: 134) points out, the sixth bowl was not really a plague but a preparation for one. In the seventh bowl, that plague arrives. In keeping with the cyclical view of the seals, trumpets, and bowls espoused in the introduction of this commentary, I view the seventh bowl as bringing history to a close. The sixth seal (6:12–14) was the storm theophany that signaled the eschaton, and the seventh seal (8:1) was a half hour of silence that stressed the hushed expectancy of God’s judgment about to unfold. Also, the seventh trumpet (11:15–19) celebrated the arrival of the final kingdom (11:15) and the eternal reign of God (11:17) as well as the final judgment (11:18), followed by another storm theophany (11:19). Most of these details are found here as well, such as

the announcement of the eschaton (16:17), the storm theophany (16:18a, 20–21) and eschatological earthquake (16:18b–19a), and divine judgment (16:19b).

(a) Voice from the Throne (16:17)

The seventh bowl is poured out ἐπὶ τὸν ἀέρα (*epi ton aera*, into the air). Giblin (1974: 488–90) links the angel here with the angel of 21:9 (“one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls”) and believes these “paired angelic disclosures” stress the transcendent character of the whole. God is in control and bringing all of this to an end. As Aune (1998a: 899) brings out, this completes the judgment on the four basic elements of the natural realm according to Greek science: earth (16:1–2), water (vv. 3–4, 12), fire (v. 8), and air (v. 17). In the other place that ἀήρ occurs (9:2), the “sun and air” were darkened by the smoke from the abyss. Here as well, judgment is on the “air,” continuing the judgment on the throne of the beast (producing darkness and pain) in 16:10. At the outset, another “loud voice from the temple” (see on 16:1) announces the completion of the divine plan. But here the voice for the first time comes also “from the throne.” The only other times a voice proceeds from the throne is in 19:5 (in the midst of the hallelujah choruses proclaiming the eschaton) and 21:3 (proclaiming the meaning of the new heavens and new earth). This is the only place in the book that the three (temple, heaven, throne) are juxtaposed, so this is a supreme eschatological moment when all the forces of the divine end of history are brought together. It is difficult to choose between God and Christ as the voice itself, though as in 16:1 there is a possible connection with Isa. 66:6 LXX (so Giesen 1997: 365), where the people are told to “hear the voice from the temple, a voice from the Lord repaying his enemies all they deserve,” which favors God as the voice (in 2027 pc later scribes inserted “the throne of God” to specify the source of the voice).

The voice of God proclaims the eschaton in electrifying simplicity by stating with finality, Γέγονεν (*Gegonen*, It has happened, It is over), the finalization of that which was put in motion when Christ cried from the cross, “It is finished” (John 19:30). Since the perfect tense (as here) is often used to stress the state of affairs resulting from an action (BDF §340 calls it “the continuance of completed action”), this means that the judgment of God has already occurred, and we are at the end of history. The meaning of γέγονεν here is related to its meaning “happen” or “come to pass.” Often in Revelation it depicts the “coming” of natural phenomena that God uses in judgment (6:12; 8:1; 11:13; 12:7; 16:18). Here it means that the time for judgment is at an end, and God’s final kingdom has arrived. Giblin (1974: 502–3; see also Kraft 1974: 211) says this refers especially to the completion of his wrath and compares it to 21:6, which declares the full realization of God’s plan. In one sense this is difficult to uphold, since the storm theophany “happens” (ἐγένοντο) in 16:18, but the events of 16:18–21 are a single whole, and so 16:17 is saying that they end the judgment of God and introduce the conclusion to the present age. Also, we must remember that the Apocalypse is cyclical; the fall of Babylon the Great in chapters 17–18 plays out the same judgments as those in the seals, trumpets, and bowls and so does not contradict the cry “It is over” here. God repeats this same statement in 21:6, at the creation of the “new heaven and new earth.” There is a certain *inclusio* between the two (16:17; 21:6), as 16:17 concludes the judgments that begin the eschaton, and 21:6 concludes the eschaton with the new creation.

(b) Storm Theophany and Earthquake (16:18–19a)

The structure of 16:18–21 is in an ABA'B' format, with the storm theophany in 16:18–19a, 20–21a, and the judgment of God in 16:19b, 21b. This is the last of four passages that allude to the cosmic

storm (“flashes of lightning, the roar of the storm, and peals of thunder”) based on the Sinai phenomena (4:5; 8:5; 11:19; 16:18; cf. Exod. 19:16–18), with the final three having the earthquake and the final two also relating the hailstorm. This is the most extensive coverage of the four and seems to sum up the others. Bauckham (1993b: 204–5) believes that there is a new exodus motif and that the decision to have the hailstorm (the seventh Egyptian plague in Exod. 9:13–35) last was intended to link it with the judgment on Gog in Ezek. 38:19–23 (which combined an earthquake and hail) and in this way to combine both theophany (Sinai) and judgment (Ezekiel). “The creation trembles and flees from the presence of God coming in wrath to judgment (cf. also 6:14; 20:11; Ps 97:1–5 etc.)” (Bauckham 1993b: 205).

This is the first time the earthquake is called “great,” though the hailstorm was also called “great” in 11:19. The description of it as greater than any that had ever happened “since people were on the earth” is reminiscent of the Olivet discourse, where Jesus spoke of the “days of tribulation” as “unequaled from the beginning, when God created the world” (Mark 13:19 par.). Both go back to Dan. 12:1 (LXX but especially close to Theodotion’s wording), which describes “a tribulation such as has not happened from the beginning of nations until then” (cf. Exod. 9:18, where the hailstorm was “the worst that had ever happened in Egypt from the day it was created until then”). In Dan. 12:1–2 a contrast is established between the people of God who will be delivered “to everlasting life” and the many who will awake “to shame and everlasting contempt.”

The earthquake is so severe that “the great city split into three parts” (16:19). This is reminiscent of the great earthquake in 6:12–14 that shook every “mountain and island from its place.” There is debate as to whether the “great city” is Jerusalem (Lohmeyer, Chilton), on the grounds that Babylon is mentioned separately later in the verse (cf. 11:8); Babylon/Rome (R. Charles, Lohse, Prigent, Mounce, Aune); or symbolic of rebellious humanity (Kiddle, Bruce, Morris). Yet Babylon/Rome, the “great city” in 17:18; 18:10, 16, 18, 19, 21, makes by far the best sense, and the mention in 16:19b is meant simply as an identification of the “great city” here. The city is split “into three parts,” indicating the totality of the devastation. The added note that “the cities of the nations fell” is proleptic of the last judgment, as in the description of the fall of “the great city” in 18:21–24 here applied to all the cities that had followed her. The description that ἔπεσαν (*epesan*, they fell) means that the earthquake was worldwide, and the cities of the nations “fell” (see also the “fall of Babylon” in 14:8; 18:2–3) in the same conflagration that hit Rome.

(c) Divine Judgment (16:19b)

The reason is given in 16:19b. Babylon the Great ἐμνήσθη ἐνώπιον τοῦ θεοῦ (*emnēsthē enōpion tou theou*, lit., “was remembered before God”), a Semitic euphemism saying God “remembered” her crimes (the verb is always passive in the NT). A similar use can be found in Acts 10:31: “Your [prayers and] acts of mercy have been remembered before God.” As Leivestad (*EDNT* 2:430) says, “The expression suggests that the angels literally bring the prayers before God and *remind* him of the deeds of human beings (Rev. 8:3–5).” That is the picture here as well in a negative context. When God is reminded and remembers, he acts. In 14:10–11 we were told of “the wine of the wrath of God that has been poured full strength into the cup of his anger,” and this language is borrowed here: God “gave her the cup of the wine of the fury of his wrath,” which is best translated “God gave her the cup of wine, namely his furious wrath.”^[21] Similarly, in 18:5, “God remembers her crimes,” leading to 18:6 that describes the absolute devastation as just retribution, saying that God will “pay her back double for what she has done” and “mix her a double portion from her own cup.” Again the principle of *lex talionis* is found: the sins of Babylon the Great have come to God’s

attention, and he has reacted in kind. Since they have drunk “the wine that leads to passion for immorality” (14:8; cf. 17:2, 4; 18:3, 9), God will give them a wine cup filled with “his furious wrath.”

(d) Results of Judgment (16:20–21)

These verses continue the effects of the storm theophany and earthquake. In the storm theophany of 6:14, “Every mountain and island was removed from its place,” and this recapitulates that event, as “every island fled, and the mountains disappeared.” This theme of the disappearance of the natural bodies is completed in 20:11, where “earth and heaven fled, and no place was found for them.” Both 16:20 and 20:11 feature οὐχ εὐρέθησαν (*ouch heurethēsan*, was not found), with the negated passive form often meaning “disappear” (so Aune 1998a: 901; BAGD 325). The disappearance of islands, mountains, and heavens is a frequent apocalyptic motif associated with the day of the Lord (Ps. 97:5; Isa. 2:12–18; 40:4; 45:2; 1 Enoch 1.6–7; 2 Esdr. [4 Ezra] 15:42; T. Moses 10.4; Sib. Or. 8.232–38).

The hailstorm completes another major judgment motif associated with the storm theophany (16:21). In the first trumpet judgment (8:7), “hail and fire mixed with blood” were cast down to earth, and in 11:19 when God’s temple was opened, there came “lightnings, the roar of the storm, peals of thunder, an earthquake, and a great hailstorm.” In addition, the other element of 8:7, fire, descends from heaven and devours the rebelling nations in 20:9. Again, the imagery is drawn from the seventh Egyptian plague in Exod. 9:13–35 as reproduced in Josh. 10:11 (judgment on the kings of the Amorites). Beasley-Murray (1978: 247) and Giesen (1997: 366) appeal to Isa. 28:2 (the judgment on Ephraim) and Ezek. 38:22 (the destruction of Gog) as background. On every occasion, the hailstorm signified the judgment of the sovereign God on the enemies of his people. Bauckham (1993b: 204–5) and Beale (1999: 844–45) believe that the hailstorm is combined with the Sinai theophany of Rev. 16:18 (= Exod. 19:18–21) and placed last in the bowls due to the Jewish apocalyptic tradition of linking the final judgments with the Egyptian plagues in order to picture the eschaton as a new exodus. Therefore, the judgments on the nations (Exod. 9) is also a revelation of the glory of God (Exod. 19). In Apoc. Abr. 30 ten plagues fall on the Gentiles, leading to an allusion to the Exod. 19 theophany.

These hailstones weigh “about a hundred pounds” (ταλαντιαία, *talantiaia*, weighing a talent = 125 librae or Roman pounds of 12 ounces each; so BAGD 803) each. One of my students figured such a hailstone would be 17.6 inches in diameter (at 59.8 pounds per cubic foot). In *The Guinness Book of Records* 1997 (114), the largest hailstones in recorded history (2.25 pounds) fell on Bangladesh on April 14, 1986, killing 92 people. The largest in the United States (1.671 pounds, a diameter of 5.62 inches) fell on Coffeyville, Kansas, on Sept. 3, 1970. Thus, this is a formidable picture of final judgment. In Exod. 9:24 such a hailstorm “had never been in all the land of Egypt since it became a nation.” This storm is the greatest ever in history.

Yet once again the earth-dwellers refuse to repent (see 2:21; 9:20–21; 16:9, 11). Instead, they ἐβλασλήμῃσαν τὸν θεόν (*eblasphēmēsan ton theon*, cursed God). The verb is first used in 13:6 of the beast “blaspheming” the name of God and then is used of the nations in 16:9, 11, 21 who refuse to repent but instead “blaspheme” or curse God for the judgments he sends. The noun cognate “blasphemy” is used in 2:9 (the slander of the “synagogue of Satan”); 13:1, 5, 6 (the blasphemy of the beast); and 17:3 (the blasphemous names on the scarlet beast). Thus, not only is God blasphemed but his people as well (2:9; 13:6b). They curse God because the plague is “incredibly severe.” They focus only on their pain, not on the message. This is what happened in the Egyptian plagues too. Like Pharaoh the unbelievers do not listen to God’s message to them but only think of

their plight, blaming it on God rather than on their own sins. There are no more opportunities to repent, so it is likely that this is the final event before the eschaton, and chapters 17–18 are a series of visions providing a set of different word pictures of the depravity of the nations under the beast (chap. 17) and the destruction that comes at the eschaton (chap. 18).

Summary and Contextualization

The final judgment septet of the bowls intensifies the seals and trumpets and effects the whole earth. It is also the only one without an interlude describing the place of the church in the events, and thus it ends more completely at the eschaton. Moreover, the Egyptian plagues are reenacted throughout the seven bowls, while only the first four trumpet judgments did so. Many of the seven themes behind the seals, trumpets, and bowls mentioned in the introduction to 6:1–8:1 recur in chapter 16. (1) The *lex talionis* of divine judgment reaches its high point in 16:5–7, where the angel and the altar rhapsodize on the justice of God in giving the earth-dwellers a taste of what they have done to the saints and prophets. (2) The sovereignty of God over creation and over the earthly gods is seen in the replication of the Egyptian plagues. He is in control of his world and uses it to punish the ungodly. (3) God continues to allow evil to come full circle, as in the sixth bowl in which God allows the false trinity to call the nations to the final battle. Evil participates in its own destruction. (4) Again, the bowls are also a final chance to repent, as seen in 16:9, 11. In proving the powerlessness of the earthly gods, as in the Egyptian plagues, God is calling on the nations to recognize the one true God and turn to him. The mission of God to the world continues to the very end. (5) Yet again (as in 9:20–21) the total depravity of the earth-dwellers is proven, as three times (16:9, 11, 21) they refuse to repent and instead curse God and blaspheme his name. This prepares for 20:11–14, for the final judgment is necessitated by the continuous refusal of the unsaved to respond to God’s offer of salvation. (6) The progressive dismantling of creation continues here, but now there is a more direct assault on the unsaved, and all the earth is affected. In the first bowl judgment, terrible boils break out on the unsaved; in the second and third they are forced to drink blood; in the fourth they are seared by the sun; in the fifth darkness and terrible pain plague the unbelievers; and in the seventh the storm theophany, with the worst earthquake and hailstorm of the book, wreak havoc on the nations. Not only is God’s creation about to be released from its “bondage to decay” (Rom. 8:19–21; cf. Rev. 20:11; 21:1), but it is now participating in God’s judgment on sinners.

The bowl judgments finalize the central section of the book (6:1–16:21) focusing on the judgments that accompany the opening of the scroll and detailing the final events of world history and the arrival of the eschaton. In it God’s earthly judgment is complete, and the purposes of these events as noted above are finalized. All that remains is the destruction of the evil empire (chaps. 17–19) and the final judgment (chap. 20). The day of Yahweh and of the Lamb is about to arrive.

Additional Notes

16:3. There are some interesting variants of ζῶντες, ⁴⁷ 2053 11854 051 046 et al. have ζῶσα (as an adjectival participle it would have the same meaning), but ζῶντες also has good support (A C 1006 1611 1841 et al.) and is the more difficult reading, since it is a Hebraism (see Aune 1998a: 855). Also, some manuscripts (⁴⁷ et al.) omit τὰ, causing the KJV to translate, “every living soul died in the sea.” This could hardly be the thrust here (see Mounce 1998: 293).

16:4. Understandably, many manuscripts (□⁴⁷ A 1006 1611 et al.) change the singular **ἐγένετο** to a plural, but the most difficult reading is the singular as here (supported by ☩ C P 046 051 et al.). Scribes would naturally try to correct it to fit the plural “rivers and springs of water.” However, see Aune (1998a: 855–56) for arguments regarding the superiority of the plural due to stronger manuscript evidence in its favor.

16:17. From the text-critical variances, it is clear that later scribes wrestled with the meaning of these images. Some have replaced **ναοῦ** with **οὐρανοῦ** (so 051* 1854 et al.), while others conflate the readings as **ναοῦ τοῦ οὐρανοῦ** (temple of heaven, so 051^c □^k).

16:18. There are also variances in the reading **ἄνθρωπος ἐγένετο** (supported somewhat by □⁴⁷ [with **ἐγένοντο**] A and with the order reversed in 2020 and several Coptic manuscripts). The plural **ἄνθρωποι ἐγένοντο** is found in 1854 11611 1006 051 046 ☩ et al. and with the article in 1 994 1828 1859 2138 et al. Yet the singular makes most sense in the context, and the variation undoubtedly stems from the presence of four **ἐγένετο** verbs in this verse.

- I. Prologue (1:1–8)
- II. Churches Addressed (1:9–3:22)
- III. God in Majesty and Judgment (4:1–16:21)
- IV. Final Judgment at the Arrival of the Eschaton (17:1–20:15)
- V. New Heaven and New Earth (21:1–22:5)
- VI. Epilogue (22:6–21)

IV. Final Judgment at the Arrival of the Eschaton (17:1–20:15)

Like other sections, this section functions at more than one level. In one sense, it begins the conclusion after the central section on the seals, trumpets, and bowls (chaps. 6–16). In this way of looking at the structure, the introduction consists of the prologue (1:1–8), the opening vision of Christ among the lampstands (1:9–20), the letters to the seven churches (chaps. 2–3), and the incredible throne vision (chaps. 4–5). The conclusion consists of the judgment of Babylon and the beast (17:1–19:5), the arrival of the eschaton (consisting of the return of Christ, millennium, and great white throne judgment, 19:6–20:15), the new heavens and new earth (21:1–22:5), and concluding promises and warnings (22:6–21). Since there is such symmetry in the introduction and conclusion (each has four sections), I have from time to time succumbed to the current fad and sought a chiasmic structure; but the sections simply do not align themselves in that way without a fair amount of manipulation (e.g., 1:9–20 with 21:1–22:5; chaps. 2–3 with 19:6–20:15; chaps. 4–5 with 17:1–19:4). Still, this provides a harmonious structure for the book.

When we look at the book along the lines of discourse analysis, however, the outline above does not suggest itself as the main one. Chapters 4–5 are too closely aligned with chapter 6, and a natural break suggests itself between chapters 4–11 and chapters 12–16 (see the introductions to the book and the sections). Still, chapters 17–22 do conclude the book, but in two sections, 17:1–20:15 and 21:1–22:21. There are three parts to 17:1–20:15, the concluding section to the contents of the scroll (the “new heavens and new earth” were probably not included since they occur after the eschaton has arrived): first, 17:1–19:5 recapitulates the events of the seals, trumpets, and bowls, telling first why Babylon has been judged (chap. 17) and then the effects of that judgment (18:1–19:5). New symbols appear, namely the great prostitute, the scarlet beast, and Babylon the Great in chapter 17, then the funeral lamentations in chapter 18. These symbols add rhetorical power to the preceding, for it is clear from the interpretation of the seven heads, the ten horns, and the waters in 17:9–18 that these describe further the beast and his followers from chapters 13–16. The judgment itself expands the picture of the seventh bowl (16:17–21) when God gives “Babylon the Great” the cup filled with his wrath. Second, 19:6–21 describes the coming of Christ in judgment and the destruction of the evil powers. Third, chapter 20 describes the millennial reign of Christ with the saints and the final destruction of the dragon and his followers, followed by the final judgment. This section features the lake of fire, with the evil forces being cast into eternal punishment in three stages, first the beast and the false prophet (19:20), then the devil (20:10), and finally the evildoers are thrown in along with Death and Hades (20:14–15). This theme of eternal punishment unites the three sections in chapters 19–20 (the victory of Christ, the millennium, and the final judgment).

At the same time, the “hallelujah” section of 19:1–8 shows the artificiality of all attempts to impose Western-style outlining on Near Eastern texts. Here we have the only use of “hallelujah” in

the NT, and the section is certainly a single whole. Yet it also functions as the transition from the judgment on Babylon in 18:1–24 to the parousia of 19:9–21, with 19:1–5 concluding chapter 18 and 19:6–8 introducing chapter 19. Thus, in my outline I have had to divide this holistic liturgy in two to delineate the structure of the section.

- IV. Final Judgment at the Arrival of the Eschaton (17:1–20:15)
 - A. Destruction of Babylon the Great (17:1–19:5)
 - B. Final Victory: The End of the Evil Empire at the Parousia (19:6–21)
 - C. The Thousand-Year Reign of Christ and Final Destruction of Satan (20:1–10)
 - D. Great White Throne Judgment (20:11–15)

A. Destruction of Babylon the Great (17:1–19:5)

This section focuses on Rome/Babylon the Great but with two distinct metaphors and radically different designs. Chapter 17 centers on Rome as the “great prostitute” who is drunk with the blood of the saints, while chapter 18 then looks at Rome as “the great city” destroyed. Also, chapter 17 features the mediating angel explaining the meaning of the symbols, while chapter 18 features the funeral laments of the kings, the merchants, and the sea captains. Moreover, chapter 17 is complex and hard to understand while chapter 18 is far more clear. In both, however, Rome’s depravity and judgment by God are uppermost. In 17:15–17 the prostitute is destroyed by the very beast and kings she follows, while in 18:10, 17, 19 the city is destroyed “in one hour” by God. Finally, the heavenly chorus sings out its “hallelujah” for the justice of God’s judgment on the great prostitute (19:1–5).

1. The Great Prostitute on the Scarlet Beast (17:1–18)

After the opening verses that introduce us to the leading characters, the great prostitute, the waters, the kings, and the scarlet beast (17:1–3),^[1] there are three sections. First the luxury and depravity of the woman are described (17:4–6), then the angel interprets the meaning of the beast in terms of his seven heads and ten horns (17:7–14), and finally the prostitute is killed by the beast and his kings (17:15–18). The mediating angel appears for the third time, with an elder answering John in 5:5 regarding the one worthy to open the seals and another elder explaining the saints in white robes in 7:13–14 (a fourth occurrence comes in 21:9–10).

- a. Introduction (17:1–2)
- b. Description of the great prostitute (17:3–6a)
- c. Angel interprets the vision (17:6b–14)
 - i. John’s confusion leads to the angel’s explanation (17:6b–7)
 - ii. Interpretation of the beast (17:8)
 - iii. Interpretation of the seven heads (17:9–11)
 - iv. Interpretation of the ten horns (17:12–14)
- d. Civil war: destruction of the prostitute (17:15–18)

Exegesis and Exposition

¹And one of the seven angels having the seven bowls came and spoke with me, saying, “Come, I will show you the judgment of the great prostitute who sits on many waters. ²With her the kings of the earth committed adultery, and the inhabitants of the earth were drunk with the wine of adultery with her.”

³He then carried me away to the desert in the Spirit. And I saw a woman seated on a scarlet beast that was covered with names of blasphemy, having seven heads and ten horns. ⁴The woman was clothed in purple and scarlet, and glittered with gold, precious stones, and pearls. She had a gold cup in her hand filled with abominations, namely the impurities of her immorality. ⁵On her forehead was written a mysterious name, “Babylon the Great, mother of prostitutes and of the earth’s abominations.” ⁶Then I saw the woman drunk with the blood of the saints, namely those who witness to Jesus.

When I saw her, I was awestruck with wonder. ⁷Then the angel said to me, “Why are you astonished? I will tell you the mystery of the woman and of the beast who carries her, the one who has seven heads and ten horns. ⁸The beast that you saw once was and is not and is about to ascend from the abyss and go to destruction. And the earth-dwellers, those whose names have not been written in the book of life from the foundation of the world, will be astonished when they see the beast that was and is and will come. ⁹In this case, moreover, a mind that has wisdom is needed. The seven heads are seven mountains on which the woman sits. And they are seven kings. ¹⁰Five are fallen, one is, and the other has not yet come. When he has come, he must remain for a little while. ¹¹The beast who was and is not is the eighth. He is of the seven and is going to go to destruction. ¹²The ten horns that you saw are ten kings who have not yet received their kingdoms. But they are going to receive authority as kings along with the beast for one hour. ¹³These have a united purpose and are going to give their power and authority to the beast. ¹⁴They will go to war along with the beast, and the Lamb will conquer them, because he is Lord of lords and King of kings. And accompanying him will be the called and the elect and the faithful.”

¹⁵Then he said to me, “The waters that you saw, on which the prostitute sat, are peoples and multitudes and nations and tongues. ¹⁶The ten horns that you saw along with the beast will hate the prostitute. They will make her desolate; they will strip her naked, devour her flesh, and consume her with fire. ¹⁷For God has put it into their hearts to accomplish his purpose, to be united in their purpose, and to give their royal authority to the beast until God’s words are fulfilled.

¹⁸The woman you saw is the great city that has dominion over the kings of the earth.”

a. Introduction (17:1–2)

The close tie between chapters 16 and 17 is seen in that the angel who invites John to see the

judgment of the great prostitute is “one of the angels having the seven bowls.” Thus, the judgment of 17:1–19:4 is seen as an extension of the bowl judgments, probably intended as an elaboration of the last two bowls that led to the destruction of Babylon the Great (esp. 16:19). Most of chapter 17 deals with the angel’s interpretation of symbols, however, and the actual judgment is not carried out until 17:16 and then throughout chapter 18. This is the same introduction as in 21:9 (“and one of the seven angels having the seven bowls came . . . and spoke with me, saying, ‘Come, I will show you . . .’”) and points to a deliberate contrast between the great prostitute and the bride of the Lamb. The one heads to final judgment and the other to “the wedding supper of the Lamb” (19:9).

This is the third time δείξω (*deixō*, I will show) appears (1:1; 4:1; cf. 21:9, 10; 22:1, 6, 8), and it always refers to the divine revelation of visionary realities, usually by angelic mediators (all except 1:1).^[2] Here the angel promises to “show” John τὸ κρίμα τῆς πόρνῆς τῆς μεγάλης (*to krima tēs pornēs tēs megalēs*, the judgment of the great prostitute).^[3] She is “great” because she is “Babylon the Great” (17:5; cf. 14:8; 16:19; 18:2, 10), a symbol for Rome and the empire of the beast. Πόρνη occurs in 17:1, 5, 15, 16; and 19:2 (a reference back to 17:2) and pictures Rome^[4] as leading the world into immorality and religious apostasy/idolatry (see also the discussion at 2:14–15, 20, and 21, where the cognates πορνεύω and πορνεία are used). The imagery of prostitution to depict both immorality and idolatry is frequent in the OT. Israel is said to have the spirit of a prostitute (Hos. 2:5; 4:10, 12, 18; 5:3–4; 6:10; 9:1) and wandered like a prostitute along the roadside (Jer. 3:1–3; cf. 2:20; 13:27; Ezek. 16:15–17 and the parable of the two prostitutes in Ezek. 23).^[5] Jerusalem has become a prostitute (Isa. 1:21), as have many pagan cities like Nineveh (Nah. 3:4) and Tyre (Isa. 23:15–17). The imagery is always that of not only committing fornication but also leading others into doing the same, in other words, playing the harlot. That is the thrust here in Rev. 17, for Babylon/Rome has become a harlot, leading other nations into immorality and idolatry.

Many contemporary figures have been suggested as the basis of the prostitute here, like the cult leader Jezebel from 2:20 (Caird 1966: 213), Cleopatra (Stauffer 1965 in Caird 1966), Messalina (Bruns 1964), or the goddess Roma (Beauvery; Krodel; C. Smith 1990c: 29–30; Aune). The image is so general^[6] that the only likely antecedent might be the goddess Roma, represented on a coin minted in A.D. 71 in Asia during the reign of Vespasian (father of Domitian) as sitting on the seven hills of Rome (cf. 17:9) bearing a sword. Aune (1998b: 922) points out the popularity of the cult of Dea Roma in Asia Minor, with followers in most of the cities. Moreover, on coins she was perched atop Rome’s seven hills. This, of course, does not prove that Dea Roma was behind the imagery here, but it is certainly possible that this cult, linked to the “harlot” motif from the OT, provided some of the background to the imagery here. Either way, the prostitute is clearly Babylon/Rome, depicted in all her alluring depravity. Some (Pippin 1992: 73; J. Kim 1999: 61) condemn the misogynistic “sexual murder” (Pippin) that takes “sexual violence against women for granted.” They argue that the prostitute here pictures colonized women that were first invaded by foreign men and then abandoned by their own men. As such they were marginalized and then victimized (Kim). Callahan (1999: 57) responds that there are no prurient images here: “Forensic, not salacious, elements dominate the text.” It is “the military language of urban siege” (for further interaction, see the additional note).

Finally, this is the prostitute τῆς καθημένης ἐπὶ ὑδάτων πολλῶν (*tēs kathēmenēs epi hydatōn pollōn*, who sits on many waters), possibly an allusion to Jer. 51:13, where Babylon is described as “you who live by many waters,” an allusion to the city’s location on the river Euphrates surrounded by a network of canals and irrigation streams from the great river. The “many waters” are defined in 17:15 as “peoples and multitudes and nations and tongues,” referring to the many

nations under the control of Babylon/Rome. To “sit upon” a nation is to conquer and control it (see also 17:3, 9, 15; 18:7 [“I sit as a queen”] for this image).

The “kings of the earth” *ἐπόρνευσαν* (*eporneusan*, committed adultery; the cognate of πόρνη above) with the great prostitute. This becomes a key phrase in 18:3, 9, where divine judgment falls on the nations because “the kings of the earth committed adultery with” Babylon. Several of the passages above (e.g., Nah. 3:4; Isa. 23:17) stress the idea of a city committing fornication with nations, leading to divine judgment. The rulers have led the nations astray, but all the people have also participated in it. In a parallel metaphor, the earth-dwellers are seen *έμεθύσθησαν . . . έκ τοῦ οἴνου* (*emethysthēsan . . . ek tou oinou*, drunk with the wine), an image of losing control and being taken over by a foreign influence. Here that influence is *τῆς πορνείας αὐτῆς* (*tēs porneias autēs*, of adultery with her; the third cognate of the πορν- family), a genitive of content identifying the wine as “fornication.” The people of the earth have joined the rulers in their actual and religious adultery. In Jer. 51:7 Babylon is condemned for making “the whole earth drunk” so that “they have now gone mad,” building on Jer. 25:15–16, where God said, “Take from my hand this cup filled with the wine of my wrath [= Rev. 14:10] and make all the nations to whom I send you drink it. When they drink it, they will stagger and go mad” (cf. Isa. 51:17). It is common for commentators (e.g., Mounce, Sweet, Roloff, Beale) to see this also as political and economic subversion, for Rome seduced the nations with promises of luxury and power. This is brought out more clearly in 18:3, 7, 9, 11–16, 19, 23 but is implicit here as well.

b. Description of the Great Prostitute (17:3–6a)

Twice John is *ἀπῆνεγκεν . . . ἐν πνεύματι* (*apēnenken . . . en pneumati*, carried away . . . in the Spirit; 17:3; 21:10), and twice he is “in the Spirit” (1:10; 4:2). The first is the means, the second the result, and all refer to the visionary experience by which God has revealed these things to John (building on the empowering by the Spirit of Yahweh in Ezek. 2:2; 3:12; 8:3; 11:1; 37:1; 43:5). Elsewhere in Revelation John is taken to the throne of heaven (4:2) and onto a high mountain (21:10), but here he is taken *εἰς ἔρημον* (*eis erēmon*, to the desert). In Scripture the symbol of a “desert” can be used positively as a place of comfort and revelation (Exod. 19; 1 Kings 19:4–6; Isa. 40:3; Ezek. 34:25; Mark 1:35, 45; 6:31–35) or negatively as a place of testing and devastation (the forty years in the wilderness; Ps. 95:7–11; Isa. 1:7; 37:25; Jer. 51:36; Matt. 4:1 par.; Heb. 3:8, 17). In Revelation the “desert” is positive in 12:6, 14, where the woman finds a place of refuge from the dragon in the desert, and negative here, where it is the location of Babylon the Great, which will become “a home for demons” (18:2; for deserts as the home for demons, see Isa. 13:21; Tob. 8:3; Matt. 12:43 par.). In particular, Isa. 21:1–10 in an “oracle concerning the desert by the sea” and is a prophecy addressed against Babylon. Some (Beckwith, Ladd, Mounce, Beale) also point to the desert as a frequent setting for visionary experiences (Exod. 3:1–3; 1 Kings 19:4–9).

As John arrives at the desert, he sees *γυναῖκα καθήμενην ἐπὶ θηρίον κόκκινον* (*gynaika kathēmenēn epithērion kokkinon*, a woman seated on a scarlet beast). This woman is certainly the “great prostitute” of 17:1, and that she “sits” on the beast could hint at some kind of control (see discussion of the verb in 17:1 above), emphasizing the influence of the empire, Babylon the Great, on the beast. While the beast is the political ruler of the empire, the woman represents the blasphemous religion that seduces the nations and the economic system that draws them into its earthly luxury. That the beast is “scarlet” most likely points to the incredible luxury of the empire, seen in the “purple and scarlet” clothing of the woman in 17:4 and the “scarlet linen” among the luxuries of Rome in 18:12, 16.^[7] The rest of the description of the beast (“covered with names of

blasphemy, having seven heads and ten horns”) is drawn from the emergence of the beast from the sea in 13:1. The heads and the horns will be interpreted in 17:9–14; the “names of blasphemy” are not mentioned again in this chapter (though see the “abominations” of 17:4), but the slandering of the name of God permeates the atmosphere of the whole section. As in 13:4, 8, 14–15, this indicates that the beast sets himself up as the “god of this world.”

The woman in 17:4 is described in terms of her incredible luxury and her moral corruption. The description here is virtually quoted in 18:16, where it is part of the list of luxuries that characterize “the great city” (18:12–13, 16). Only royalty and the very wealthy would be “dressed^[8] in purple (the color of royalty) and scarlet (the color of wealth),” typifying the incredible commercial prosperity of the Roman Empire. These were very expensive dyes and so typified the rich and the powerful. In addition, she “glittered with gold [note the emphatic cognate *κεχρυσωμένη χρυσίῳ* (*kechrysōmenē chrysō*, lit., ‘golded with gold’)], precious stones, and pearls,” also repeated in 18:16.^[9] Aune (1998b: 935) points out that this is drawn from “the ancient courtesan *topos*,” with its opulent dress, wealthy demeanor, and gaudy jewelry “exacted from their lovers.” Yet the true significance of all this luxury is clarified by what follows. She has *ποτήριον χρυσοῦν* (*potērion chrysoun*, a gold cup) that is filled with *βδελυγμάτων καὶ τὰ ἀκάθαρτα τῆς πορνείας αὐτῆς*^[10] (*bdelygmatōn kai ta akatharta tēs porneias autēs*, abominations, namely,^[11] the impurities of her immorality). All her wealth is an abomination to God, as it is coupled with her immorality. This is taken from Jer. 51:7, where Jeremiah prophesies the destruction of Babylon and calls it “a gold cup in the LORD’s hand” that has “made the whole earth drunk.” While in Jeremiah, Babylon is the gold cup, here the depravity of Babylon provides the contents of the gold cup. The wealth of the great prostitute, Babylon the Great, intoxicates the people of the earth but leads them to the wrath of God. The first term, *βδελυγμάτων*, is religious, describing what is detestable in God’s sight, “what must not be brought before God because it arouses his wrath” (BAGD 137). It connotes how abhorrent pagan ways are to God, specifically idols, often called “abominations” in the OT (Jer. 13:27; 32:35; 44:22; Ezek. 5:9; 6:9). The second term, *ἀκάθαρτα*, is cultic, describing how “unclean” these things (immorality and religious blasphemy) are to God. In 16:13 the term described the “spirits like frogs” that were the false trinity deceiving the nations, and in 18:2 it describes the unclean spirits and birds that will inhabit desolate Babylon after God’s judgment falls on it. Both terms depict how abhorrent the wealth and immorality of the final unholy Roman empire are to God.

Now the woman is defined more fully (17:5) as we are told the name “on her forehead.” Throughout the ancient world, parents would give names to their children that told their hopes for them, and the names would reveal their desired destinies. (One can almost summarize the contents of each of the Minor Prophets by studying the meaning of their names.) Roman courtesans may have placed their names on the headbands they wore (so Beckwith, Swete, Talbert, Thomas, Mounce; doubted by Ford), so this divulges her true identity. The name on the forehead is found four times for the followers of the beast (13:16; 14:9; 17:5; 20:4) and four times for the people of God (7:3; 9:4; 14:1; 22:4). As said in 13:16, this is another of the “great imitations” and emphasizes further the contrast between the great whore and the bride of the Lamb.

There is some debate as to whether *μυστήριον* (*mystērion*, mystery) is part of her name (“Mystery, Babylon the Great. . .,” so KJV, NIV) or is in apposition with “name” (“on her forehead was written a mysterious name,” so NRSV, NLT; also Lohmeyer, Walvoord, Johnson, Ladd, Chilton, Giesen, Michaels). In keeping with the use of “mystery” in 1:20 and 10:7, the latter is more likely, for it always refers to the divine truths that had been hidden but are now being revealed in these

end times. Beale (1999: 858) adds that “mystery” here refers not only to end-time events but also to the “ironic manner” or “unexpected way in which the kingdom of evil will begin to be defeated: that kingdom will turn against itself and start to self-destruct even before Christ returns” (cf. 17:7 as developed in 17:8–18). The “mystery” then is “Babylon the Great,” telling us specifically that she represents the empire of the beast. As discussed in 14:8, “Babylon the Great” echoes Dan. 4:30, where it is used to show the arrogance of Nebuchadnezzar against God and the judgment about to fall. It was frequently used for Rome (1 Pet. 5:13; 2 Bar. 11.1; 67.7; 79.1; Sib. Or. 5.143, 159; 2 Esdr. [4 Ezra] 3:2) because like Babylon, Rome also conquered Israel and destroyed its temple as well as led the world into immorality; it occurs six times in the Apocalypse (14:8; 16:19; 17:5; 18:2, 10, 21).

She is further described as ἡ μήτηρ τῶν πορνῶν καὶ τῶν βδελυγμάτων τῆς γῆς (*hē mētēr tōn pornōn kai tōn bdelygmatōn tēs gēs*, mother of prostitutes and of the earth’s [\[12\]](#) abominations). In the NT the phrase “son of” refers to one’s primary characteristic (e.g., “son of righteousness”). Thus, to be called “mother of” means not only that it characterizes one but that one has reproduced it in others. Thus, the unholy Roman empire of the Antichrist has seduced the other nations into immorality and idolatry as well as committing such heinous sins herself (the “abominations” and “immorality” in 17:4 above). Babylon as “mother of harlots” has at times been compared with Cybele, the “Magna Mater” of the gods, who had an orgiastic cult in the ancient world (Kuhn, *TDNT* 1:515; Seebass, *NIDNTT* 1:142), or with Rome itself described as a deity, with its Latin name (“Roma”) spelled backward to give its “secret name,” “Amor” (Latin for “love”; see Aune 1998b: 926–27). Both are interesting, but neither can be proven. A closer parallel would be those OT passages in which apostate Israel is pictured as a mother who prostitutes herself (Hos. 2:2–7; cf. Isa. 50:1; see Aune 1998b: 937).

In Rev. 17:4 the whore held a gold cup that pictured her as drunk with idolatry and immorality. Here in 17:6 we see her drunk also with “the blood of the saints, namely [epexegetical καὶ, *kai*, that is] [\[13\]](#) those who witness to Jesus [Ἰησοῦ, *Iēsou*, as an objective genitive].” [\[14\]](#) The metaphor of being drunk on blood occurs often in the OT (Isa. 34:5, 7 LXX; 49:26; Jer. 46:10; Ezek. 39:18–19) and in ancient writers (Josephus, *J.W.* 5.8.2 §344; Suetonius, *Tiberius* 59). It pictures the great joy with which depraved armies would slaughter entire families as well as opposing armies. In 14:8 and 17:2 Babylon got the nations drunk with her immorality, but here they are drunk with the blood of the saints. There is a natural association, since red wine would look like blood, and so the image is all the more powerful, going back to 13:7, where God allows the beast to “make war against the saints and conquer them.” Thus, there are four things Babylon focuses on here: idolatry, immorality, luxury, and persecution. For instance, Tacitus described the carnage under Nero, saying Christians were “covered with skins of beasts . . . torn by dogs . . . nailed to crosses . . . doomed to the flames and burned to serve as a nightly illumination” (*Annals* 15.44).

In keeping with the frequent motif of perseverance in faithful witness (see n. 14), the saints are identified specifically as “witnesses to Jesus.” In 12:11 the people of God “conquer” Satan by “the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony. They did not love their lives even to the point of death.” This is part of the connection in the book between μάρτυς and “martyr,” a connection that later led to using the term for “martyrdom.” The people of God throughout the book are required to remain faithful in spite of the intensity of persecution, even to the point of dying (cf. Mark 8:34). There is no hint anywhere that during the terrible persecution the saints are hiding in forests, caves, and remote places lest they be killed. Rather, they engage in fearless witness throughout this period.

c. Angel Interprets the Vision (17:6b–14)

i. John's Confusion Leads to the Angel's Explanation (17:6b–7)

As a result of the vision of the great prostitute, John is ἐθαύμασα . . . θαῦμα μέγα (*ethaumasasa . . . thauma mega*, lit. “amazed with great amazement”) or “awestruck with wonder.” The root is used often in the NT for the astonishment people feel at great deeds such as the miracles of Jesus (Mark 5:20; Matt. 15:31). Here it is both wonder at the incredible vision and at the same time confusion at the imagery. He had been told by the angel (17:1) that he would see Babylon's judgment, but instead he saw her luxury, glory, and seeming triumph. He is both perplexed and horrified.^[15] As Aune (1998b: 938) brings out, this also functions rhetorically to introduce the interpretation of the angel, as often in apocalyptic writings. In two passages Daniel is “greatly perplexed” (Dan. 4:19) and “troubled in spirit” (Dan. 7:15) at dreams God had sent him, and interpretation ensues. This is the same situation here. In Rev. 5:4 John weeps at the prospect of no one worthy to open the seals, and an elder explains the situation to him. In 7:13 the elder anticipates John's puzzlement and explains the meaning of “these in white robes.” This is the third time John is overwhelmed, so an angel explains the significance of the scene to John.

Thus, the angel says to him in 17:7, Διὰ τί ἐθαύμασας; (*Dia ti ethaumasas?* Why are you astonished? or “filled with wonder and perplexity,” catching the double meaning of the verb). This also is rhetorical, for the reader has the same feelings. The message in a sense is, “God is sovereign over all this, and her temporary triumph has already been predicted in chapter 13. So there is no reason to be perplexed.” Thus, the angel now promises to interpret for John the details of “the mystery” (see on 17:5) regarding the details of the vision in 17:1–6: “the woman and the beast that carries her having seven heads and ten horns.” The explanation that follows, however, focuses on the beast, and the woman is never interpreted. Her downfall is described in 17:16 in a reenactment of the civil war motif from the second seal (6:3–4), with the beast and the kings turning on her and destroying her. The theme is the same as the four horsemen in 6:1–8: evil must come full circle, turn upon itself, and self-destruct.

ii. Interpretation of the Beast (17:8)

The parts of the interpretations in this chapter tend to be introduced by ὃ εἶδες (*ho eides*, that you saw, 17:8, 12, 15, 16, 18), referring back to the vision of 17:1–6a. The one exception is 17:9, where the phrase is not used to introduce the interpretation of the seven hills. This is a parody of both God and Christ. In 1:4, 8; 4:8; 11:17; and 16:5, God is entitled (with some variation), “the one who was and who is and who is to come.” Now the beast “once was and is not and is about to ascend from the abyss and go to destruction.” It is clear from 13:4, 5, 6b, 8, 15 that the beast demands worship as “the god of this world” (see 2 Cor. 4:4). In the same way, the “was and is not” parodies Jesus' death and resurrection. In 1:18 Christ says, “I am the Living One. I was dead, and behold, I am alive for eternity” (also 2:8). The beast imitates this in 13:3, 12, 14 with his “mortal wound that is healed,” and this in one sense alludes to that (building on the Nero redivivus legend, see Caird, Wall). The phrase “was and is not” also points forward to the “eighth king” of 17:11, the Antichrist who “was” with Satan, “is not” here right now, but “will come” at the end of history.^[16] In other words, the Antichrist will assume power and take upon himself divine attributes but is the absolute opposite of divinity.

This is the third time that the beast is said to ἀναβαίνειν ἐκ τῆς ἀβύσσου (*anabainein ek tēs*

abyssou, ascend from the abyss). In 11:7 he ascends from the abyss in order to kill the two witnesses, and in 13:1 he ascends from the sea in order to become part of the false trinity and conduct the war of the dragon. In keeping with the language of 17:8–11, this ascension has not yet occurred but is “about to” happen in the imminent future. Some (Hendriksen 1967: 170; Mounce 1998: 314) take this of the repeated ascensions of anti-Christian despots “down through history,” but all the imagery here points to the final appearance of the Antichrist at the end of history (see also Beale 1999: 865). Yet his destiny is settled. As he ascends, he εἰς ἀπώλειαν ὑπάγει^[17] (*eis apōleian hypagei*, is going to go [a prophetic present] to destruction). Beale (1999: 864–65) points to an echo here of the same pattern of rising and being destroyed found three times of the little horn in Dan. 7:11, 17–18, 23, 26. In Daniel as here, the demonic powers behind the little horn/beast will temporarily prevail over the people of God (see Rev. 9:1–2, 11; 11:7; 13:7), but his predetermined destiny is “destruction.” As said in 12:12, the beast “knows his time is short” and that he is predestined for destruction. His frustrated anger fuels his efforts in chapters 12–13. He knows that his protracted slaughter of the saints will end in defeat, but it is all he can do in the short time he has left. He will “destroy” (see 9:11) as many of the saints as he can, but he can only take their earthly lives. His “destruction” will be eternal (20:10).

As in 13:3b–4, when the earth-dwellers (for this descriptive phrase see 13:8, 14) see the counterfeit resurrection, they θαυμασθήσονται (*thaumasthēsontai*, will be astonished), the same term used of the world in 13:3b and of John in 17:6. In Rev. 13:3–4 the wonder leads to worship, and that is probably implicit here as well. Indeed, much of the language here has been taken from 13:3b (“amazed”) and 8 (“those whose names are not written in the book of life belonging to the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world”). However, here the predestinarian language is not used of “the Lamb slain” as in 13:8 but of the earth-dwellers whose names were kept from the book of life from eternity past. The phrase “written in the book of life” means that they are placed on the rolls of the books of heavenly citizens and refers both to the security of believers in 3:5 and 21:27 (for 20:12 as a reference to believers, see the discussion of that verse) and to God’s rejection of unbelievers in 13:8 and 17:8. This roll of citizens was written “before the world was created,” pointing once more to the sovereignty and omniscience of God.

The reason for the astonishment and worship is that they “see”^[18] the counterfeit resurrection. The title for the beast (“was and is not and will come”) is repeated from 17:8a with one alteration, using παρέσται (*parestai*, will come), with the future tense emphasizing the certainty of the beast’s counterfeit resurrection. This event was mentioned three times in chapter 13 (vv. 3, 12, 14) and three times in this chapter (17:8a, 8b, 11), so it is the critical event in the ascension of the Antichrist to power.

iii. Interpretation of the Seven Heads (17:9–11)

As the angel moves further into the interpretation of the beast, he states ὧδε ὁ νοῦς ὁ ἔχων σοφίαν (*hōde ho nous ho echōn sophian*, In this case, moreover, a mind that has wisdom is needed). This repeats the call for wisdom in 13:18 (regarding the number of the beast) and has the same meaning (see on that verse). In both places divinely given wisdom is needed to solve the apocalyptic riddle. Furthermore, as in 13:18 the reference here is to the preceding rather than the following. The astounding nature of the beast and the events precipitated by his coming demand both understanding and wisdom, a fact often stressed in apocalyptic texts (Dan. 1:4, 17; 9:22; 11:33; 12:10; T. Reub. 46; T. Zeb. 6.1; Sib. Or. 5.286; see Aune 1998b: 941; Beale 1999: 867, who adds that this “wisdom” is also needed to avoid deception by the beast). This means that the reader needs to turn

to God for the wisdom to understand these incredible images and coming events. The angel then goes on to interpret further details regarding the beast in order to give John the understanding he lacks.

At the outset, the angel identifies the seven heads with “seven mountains,” a phrase often used for Rome in the ancient world because it was built on seven hills (see Cicero, *Att.* 6.5; Pliny, *Nat. Hist.* 3.66–67; et al.; see Swete 1911: 220 for others). The city began with an amalgamation of groups living on the seven hills (Aventine, Caelian, Capitoline, Equiline, Palatine, Quirinal, Viminal), and during Domitian’s reign a festival (the *Septimontium*) celebrated it. The woman in 17:1 was “sitting on many waters,” which in 17:15 will be seen to be the inhabitants of the empire, meaning that she controls them. Here she “sits” on the seven hills, possibly meaning that she is enthroned on Rome (note 1 Enoch 24.1–25.3, where the seven mountains are a throne on which the Lord of Glory will sit at the eschaton). Both images describe the power of the beast’s empire (the woman). The seven hills are then further identified with “seven kings.”

Most identify these “kings” with Roman emperors in some fashion, but it is incredibly difficult, because the vision goes on to say (17:10b–11), “Five are fallen, one is, and the other has not yet come. When he has come, he must remain for a little while. The beast who was and is not is the eighth. He is of the seven and is going to go to destruction.” If emperors, this means that five previous emperors have died (ἐπεσαν, *epesan*, fallen—a euphemism for death), and the present emperor is soon to be succeeded by a seventh, whom God will allow to reign for a time (δεῖ, *dei*, must, speaks of divine necessity; see 1:1; 4:1; 10:11; 11:5; 20:3; 22:6). The eighth is the beast of 17:8 who “was and is not,” again a reference to his counterfeit resurrection (the description of 17:10, “fallen—is—yet to come,” is probably a deliberate reflection of the threefold title of 17:8). Built on the Nero redivivus legend (see on 13:3a), the beast is killed and rises from the dead, causing the nations to wonder and worship, accepting him as their god (13:3–4, 8, 14–15). At the same time, this final unholy king is “of the seven,” meaning in some way he arises from the midst of the previous seven kings. Thus, the numbering is 5 + 1 + 1 + 1, and scholars have debated the significance of this for centuries. A list of the emperors will help:

Julius Caesar (44 B.C.)

Augustus (27 B.C.–A.D. 14)

Tiberius (14–37)

Caligula (37–41)

Claudius (41–54)

Nero (54–68)

Galba, Otho, Vitellius (68–69)

Vespasian (69–79)

Titus (79–81)

Domitian (81–96)

Nerva (96–98)

Trajan (98–117)

The solution to this puzzle depends heavily on whether one dates the writing of the book during the reign of Nero or Vespasian or Domitian. It also depends on whether Julius Caesar or Augustus is the first. Since Caesar called himself *imperator* and since Augustus was his nephew (Gaius Octavius), it may be best to make Julius the first (though Roman historians themselves debated

whether Julius should be included as the first, e.g., Suetonius [yes] vs. Tacitus [no]).

1. If the book were written during Nero's reign or shortly after, the solution would be simple. Nero was the sixth emperor (after Julius, Augustus, Tiberius, Caligula, and Claudius) now on the throne, and the "revived Nero" (Nero redivivus) would also be the eighth who would return as the Antichrist (cf. Wilson 1993: 598–99). The "seventh" could look to the three pretenders as a single king (or see the seventh as Galba, the seventh Caesar; so Chilton 1987: 436) or skip them and refer to Vespasian (so Ford 1975b: 290–91). Bell (1979: 96–97) has another option, arguing that it was written in June 68 during "the year of the four emperors." Starting with Augustus, Nero was the fifth and Galba the sixth. As I discussed in the introduction, however, there are problems with dating the book during Nero's reign. This can be interpreted to fit that date, but is it likely?

2. Some (R. Charles, Swete, Rissi) think the vision was received in Vespasian's reign but written down in Domitian's. Vespasian then would be the sixth (counting from Augustus) and Titus the short-lived seventh. Domitian (linked with Nero in terms of his evil reign by Roman writers [but not in the province of Asia]) would be the Antichrist. But there is no evidence that Domitian himself was considered the Antichrist in the book. Moreover, this would demand the omission of the three "pretenders" (Galba, Otho, Vitellius), who were considered emperors in much of the Roman world (though see Bruce 1986: 1621 for arguments on behalf of omitting them).

3. Some (Strobel 1964: 439–40; Ulrichsen; Prigent; Krodel) believe we should begin with Caligula as the first anti-Christian, evil emperor and as the first emperor to come to power after the death and resurrection of Christ. The five fallen (minus the three pretenders) were all persecutors of Christians, and Domitian would be the sixth on the throne (another anti-Christian ruler). [19] This is interesting, but it cannot be taken as more than a possibility because no evidence for considering Caligula as the first has been forthcoming. Moreover, why not start with Tiberius, who was on the throne when Christ died?

4. One could also begin with Nero, include the three pretenders, and make Vespasian the fifth. Then Titus is the one on the throne (the sixth) and Domitian the seventh (Allo in Strobel 1964: 437–38). But dating the book in the reign of Titus would be problematic, for there is no evidence pointing to his reign. Moreover, the prophecy would be wrong, since Domitian had a lengthy rather than brief reign.

5. Schüssler Fiorenza (1991: 97) believes the five "fallen" to be those emperors who had suffered violent deaths (Julius Caesar, Caligula, Claudius, Nero, Domitian), so that the one now on the throne was Nerva (dating the book in 97–98), with Trajan the seventh who would reign a short time and Nero the eighth who would return. Another approach is that of Strobel (1964: 439–40), who takes those who died violently to be Caligula, Claudius, Nero, Vespasian, and Titus. Thus, Domitian would be on the throne. The problem, though, is that in both cases all did not truly die violently, and Trajan did not reign a short time. Both are interesting but too speculative.

6. Still others (Seiss, Ladd, Walvoord, Hendriksen, Thomas) believe these are not kings but empires, with the five being previous empires (perhaps Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Persia, Greece), and Rome the sixth, present empire. The seventh and eighth would be future empires. This depends somewhat on a prior decision as to whether the beast is an empire or an individual. If my arguments regarding the beast in chapter 13 are correct, these are more likely "kings" (the term used here) than kingdoms. Moreover, it is difficult on this basis to account for the seventh (short-lived) empire in terms of the many empires of world history.

7. Many (Beckwith, Caird, Beasley-Murray, Lohmeyer, Sweet, Lohse, Wall, Giesen, Mounce, Aune) believe that the numbers should not be connected to actual kings or empires but are

apocalyptic symbols, with the seven meaning the world kingdoms are complete. This would be in keeping with the use of sevens throughout the book (especially the seven heads of the beast) and with extrabiblical works that also use numbers symbolically for world empires (e.g., 1 Enoch 91.12–17, 93; 2 Esdr. [4 Ezra] 14:11; 2 Bar. 56–74; so Mounce 1998: 317). This is probably the best of the options since it fits the type of symbolism used in the book. However, I would amend this on the lines of Bauckham (1993b: 405–7) to include a symbolical and historical view. That is, the 5 + 1 + 1 does refer to Roman emperors, and both John and his readers presupposed that the reigning emperor was Domitian (decided on the basis of dating the book, not on the basis of this passage). The numbering was not a reference to specific emperors, however, but a symbolic reference to the belief that the Roman tyranny was a temporary phenomenon about to be completed (in the seventh short-lived ruler) and would lead to the eschaton.

Thus, the beast is the eighth emperor (17:11), who at the time of writing has not yet appeared (“is not”; see on 17:8). This Antichrist is *ἐκ τῶν ἑπτὰ* (*ek tōn hepta*, of the seven) in the sense that he will follow their opposition to God and persecution of his people. He will not be another Roman emperor but will have “the same sort of role” (Mounce 1998: 318), namely, the same evil function as they. Some think this fits again the Nero redivivus theme, so that John believed Nero himself would be returning. Michaels says it best (1997: 197): “The angel probably alludes to that superstition, not to endorse it as true, but to make the point that the only figure from remembered history to whom the beast might be compared in its cruelty to the people of God was the ill-fated Nero. The point is not that the eighth king is actually *Nero redivivus*, but that he is like Nero in his character and destiny.”

Some believe the idea of the beast as the eighth king is a parody of the resurrection of Christ (Beale 1999: 875–76) or his parousia (Bauckham 1993b: 407) on the “eighth day,” which in Jewish thinking followed the seven days of creation with the “eighth day” of the new creation (2 Enoch 33.1–2; Barn. 15.9; Sib. Or. 1.280–81). The beast as “eighth” is a parody of the name *Ἰησοῦς* (*Iēsous*, Jesus), which in gematria adds up to 888 and is antithetical to 666 (see on 13:18). Thus, the beast is again imitating Jesus. Of the two, a symbol of the resurrection is more likely,^[20] for that is the meaning of the threefold “is—is not—is to come” of the title in 17:8, 11. As Jesus was raised on the eighth day (the first day of the week), so the beast will be raised in order to deceive the nations into worshipping him as god.

iv. Interpretation of the Ten Horns (17:12–14)

The third aspect of the beast (after the beast himself, 17:8, and his seven heads, 17:9–11) is the ten horns, building on the ten horns of Dan. 7:7–8, 20–25, among which the little horn appeared. In Daniel these are kings who arise from the final kingdom and prepare for the little horn to take power. Since Rome divided its empire into ten provinces, it is common to suppose that these are the governors of the ten provinces. With Aune (1998b: 951), however, it is best to see the background in the Roman practice of appointing client kings in various conquered territories and provinces. These were honorary titles but were considered higher than the governors or tetrarchs of provinces. Still, they reported to Rome and functioned under its authority. Herod the Great was named “king” in 42 B.C., and his sons Archelaus, Antipas, and Philip vied to retain the title after his death, though none was allowed to do so. Only his grandson Agrippa I (A.D. 37) and great-grandson Agrippa II (A.D. 49) were named kings. These ten kings here are yet to appear but have all the characteristics of client kings. They draw their authority from a higher power and yield it to the beast. They follow him into war.

The events presupposed here relate to an ongoing series of passages in the book. In 7:1 the four angels at the four corners of the earth hold back the four winds of destruction (Bauckham 1993b: 407 points out that ten is the triangular number of four, so 7:1 may be echoed here). When these winds are loosed, it is obvious that God's judgment will have arrived. Then in 16:12 the Euphrates is dried up (perhaps by the winds of 7:1), allowing the "kings of the east" to come and support the beast in his preparation for war. The false trinity sends out their unclean "spirits like frogs" to call the "kings of the whole world" (not the same as the "kings from the east" but rather the rulers of the nations)^[21] to "gather together for battle" (16:14) at Armageddon. This passage is an expansion of those scenes. That they "have not yet received their kingdom" connects them to the "kings from the east" (the image of rulers of the Parthian tribes having come to invade) who are to appear at the end on the final period and bolster the forces of the beast. The first-century readers would understand that their former enemies (the kings from the east) now join with the patron kings of the "emperor" (the beast). In keeping with Roman practice, they will be given authority by the beast, as he was given "his power and his throne and great authority" by the dragon (13:2). But in this case, as in 13:5, the actual source of that authority is God, not the dragon or the beast. God gives them their "authority as kings" for only μίαν ὥραν (*mian hōran*, one hour), a phrase also used in 18:10, 17, 19 for the sudden and virtually instantaneous destruction of Babylon the Great. So they have power only for the short period of the persecution of the saints and the final battle, the "great tribulation" period (7:14). Thus, they reign during the three-and-a-half-year period of the beast, for God gives them authority μετὰ τοῦ θηρίου (*meta tou thēriou*, along with the beast), a reference back to 13:5–8, where God authorized the beast for his nefarious actions.

These ten kings are united (17:13), for God ensures that they have μίαν γνώμην (*mian gnōmēn*, lit., "one mind") or a single purpose. As Aune (1998b: 952, following van Unnik 1970) points out, this is an idiom from the arena of politics and speaks of unanimity on the part of citizens (here rulers) regarding a point of action. In other words, they are "of one accord" in yielding their authority to the beast. They follow him wholeheartedly and give him their absolute support, agreeing with everything he does. Thus, they "give" (continuing the present tenses of 17:9–14 to dramatize the actions of this final period) the beast τὴν δύναμιν καὶ ἐξουσίαν αὐτῶν (*tēn dynamin kai exousian autōn*, their power and authority), meaning their total allegiance and support (the presence of a single article governing both nouns brings them into a conceptual unity). They receive "authority" but now return that authority along with their "power" (forming a hendiadys to indicate their surrender of everything to the beast) to the Antichrist, forming a united front. Thus, there are four groups: the Antichrist, the earth-dwellers who worship him, the ten kings who give him their total support, and the rest of the "kings of the earth" who join their coalition (16:14, 16).

The "single purpose"^[22] behind their actions is now revealed in 17:14; they desire to μετὰ τοῦ ἀρνίου πολεμήσουσιν (*meta tou arniou polemēsousin*, make war against the Lamb), with the future tense (after the present tenses of 17:9–13) stressing the certainty of the events. In 12:17 and 13:7 the dragon and the beast go to war against the saints (echoing Dan. 7:21); these texts refer to the terrible period of persecution that typifies the final period of history. Here the kings who are allied with them go to war against the Lamb; this refers to the final battle inaugurated in 16:12, 14 and executed in 19:19, where "the beast, the kings of the earth, and their armies gather to make war against the rider on the white horse and his army," that is, "Armageddon" (16:16). The emphasis on the "Lamb" here builds on the fact that the Lamb has "seven horns" in 5:6, transforming him into the conquering ram, and the "wrath of the Lamb" (6:16) focuses on the very victory this passage is

describing. While the kings “make war,” the Lamb νικῆσει (*nikēsei*, will conquer) them. As in 19:19–20, the impression is that the victory is virtually instantaneous. Beale (1999: 880) points out that the language here is a deliberate reversal of Dan. 7:21; there the little horn (= the beast) conquers the saints, while here the Lamb conquers the beast and his followers.

The reason for this final victory is that the Lamb, not the Antichrist, κύριος κυρίων ἐστὶν καὶ βασιλεὺς βασιλέων (*kyrios kyriōn estin kai basileus basileōn*, is Lord of lords and King of kings). The Roman emperor was called “king of kings” because he presided over the vassal kings of the empire. But his absolute reign was pretense in light of the absolute sovereignty of the Lamb, the true “Lord of lords.” This title was normally used of God, as often in the LXX (Deut. 10:17; Dan. 2:37; 2:47; 4:37), intertestamental literature (2 Macc. 13:4; 1 Enoch 9.4; 63.4), and NT (1 Tim. 6:15). It is debated whether Dan. 4:37 (Beale 1985: 618–20; Beale 1999: 881) or 1 Enoch 9.4 (Aune 1998b: 954; see him for the history of the title) is more influential on John here, but neither is absolutely necessary as the source.^[23] This is drawing on the Jewish and early Christian motif of Yahweh as “King of kings and Lord of lords,” then applying this to the Lamb as one with God. In light of “Babylon the Great” in 14:18; 16:19; 17:5; 18:2, 10, however, Dan. 4:37 is particularly apt, for there the title is used of Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, and Rome was known as “Babylon” in Christian circles (see also 1 Pet. 5:13).

In Rev. 2:26–27 Christ promises the “overcomers” that they will be given authority over the nations and will “shepherd them with a rod of iron,” an application of Ps. 2:9 that is reproduced in Rev. 19:15, where the rider on the white horse wields the iron rod. In other words, the saints will participate in the final war. That is stated even more clearly here, as κλητοὶ καὶ ἐκλεκτοὶ καὶ πιστοί (*klētoi kai eklektoi kai pistoi*, the called and the elect and the faithful) form part of Christ’s army. This is also a further vindication of the saints and an additional answer to their cry for vengeance in 6:9–11. God answered their prayer partially in the trumpets and bowls; now he responds further by allowing them to participate in the great victory over those who have martyred them. Moreover, they have already “conquered” the dragon “by the blood of Christ and by the word of their testimony,” that is, by their very martyrdom (12:11; cf. 15:2–3), and now they conquer him with finality by accompanying the “Lord of lords and King of kings”^[24] on “the great day of their [God’s and the Lamb’s] wrath” (6:17; cf. 16:14).

Some (Bauckham 1993b: 210; Aune 1998b: 956) point to two types of apocalyptic holy war texts: texts in which God’s people are passive and he wins the victory alone (Exod. 14:13–14; 2 Kings 19:32–35; Isa. 37:33–36; 2 Chron. 20; 1 Enoch 56), and texts in which the saints (or angels) are active and participate in the victory (Joel 3:11b; Zech. 14:5b; 1 Enoch 90.19; 91.12; 95.3, 7; 98.12; Jub. 23.30; Apoc. Abr. 29.17–20). In a sense both occur in Revelation, with the active model in 2:26–27 and 17:14 and a modified form of the passive model perhaps found in 19:14, where the “armies of heaven” accompany him but do not seem to participate in the battle. The description of them as “called, elect, and faithful” continues the theme of divine ownership and perseverance. The first two terms are found only here in the book (they are combined also in Matt. 22:14, “Many are called, but few are chosen”), but the idea of being God’s possession is seen in the “seal” of 7:2–4 and in their names “written in the book of life before the foundation of the world” in 21:27 (cf. 13:8; 17:8; 20:12, 15). The point is that they belong to God as his “chosen ones.” The necessary response is seen in their remaining “faithful” to God in the midst of temptation and persecution, with Jesus as “faithful witness” as their model (1:5; 3:14; 19:11) and their own “faithfulness” as the result (2:10; 17:14; cf. 13:10b; 14:12; 16:15). In other words, participation in the heavenly army demands lives of faithfulness to the “commands of God and the testimony of Jesus” (12:17; 14:12).

d. Civil War: Destruction of the Prostitute (17:15–18)

So far the angel has described the beast rather than the harlot. Now the angel completes the tour through the labyrinth of interpretation by describing both the identity and fate of the great prostitute. First, the angel defines the “waters on which the prostitute sits” (see 17:1). That refers to “peoples and multitudes and nations and tongues.” This particular concatenation of terms for all the peoples of the nations is used seven times in the book, both of the people of God (5:9; 7:9) and of the earth-dwellers (10:11; 11:9; 13:7; 14:6). This is a fifth use of the phrase for the sinners and means that the prostitute rules over the peoples of the world. As stated in 17:1, this stems from Jer. 51:13, building on the picture of Babylon as sitting on “many waters.” “Waters” as a metaphor for inhabitants was common in the OT (Isa. 8:7; 17:12–13; Jer. 46:7–8; 47:2; so Beale 1999: 882). Thus, the harlot depicts the “great city” controlling all the inhabitants of the world (see also 17:18).

The true feelings of the beast for the harlot are now revealed (17:16). The civil war motif of the four horsemen in 6:1–8 is reenacted as the beast and kings turn upon the harlot and destroy her (Caird 1966: 221 calls this “John’s most vivid symbol for the self-destructing power of evil”). The “hatred” that the powers of evil have for their followers has already been revealed in the fifth and sixth trumpets, where the demonic locusts torture their followers for five months and then the demonic horsemen kill one-third of humankind. This fits the pattern of demon possession in the Gospels, where the demons seek to torture and kill those they possess (cf. Mark 5:1–20; 9:14–29). Satan and his fallen angels have no love for human beings, who are made in the image of God and are still loved by God. Therefore, by inflicting as much pain and suffering on God’s created beings as they can, Satan and his forces are getting back in some small way at God. This is the background for the scene here, as the beast and his vassal kings turn on the prostitute/Babylon the Great/Rome and destroy her. This picture of destruction will be elaborated in the funeral dirges of chapter 18 and again in the terrible “great supper of God” in which the carrion birds feast on the flesh of the destroyed armies in 19:17–18, 21. Such an eschatological civil war is predicted in Ezek. 38:21, where in the judgment of Gog “everyone’s sword will be against his brother.”

In a scene reminiscent of the Nero redivivus legend in which Nero returns with an army of Parthians to destroy Rome (cf. Sib. Or. 5.361–69), we learn first the reason for the betrayal: the kings and the beast *μισήσουσιν* (*misēsousin*, will hate) the prostitute (these are not the same kings as “the kings of the earth” who mourn her in 18:9–10). It is this hatred that causes them to turn on her. This was indeed one of the great fears of Rome, for if its vassal kings ever united against it, they could accomplish what Hannibal could not—the successful invasion and destruction of Rome. The first metaphor, *ἡρημωμένην ποιήσουσιν αὐτήν* (*ērēmōmenēn poiēsousin autēn*, make her desolate), provides the general picture. The perfect participle refers to the state of being that results from the actions in the rest of the verse; it is the cognate of *ἔρημος* (*ērēmos*, desert), referring as it does to the “laying waste” or “depopulating” of cities (BAGD 309). It is used again in 18:17, 19 for the “desolation” of Babylon the Great “in one hour” by God.

The rest of 17:16 details the series of steps by which her destruction occurs. They “strip her naked, devour her flesh, and consume her with fire.” The whole picture is built on Ezek. 23:25–29 (cf. also 16:37–41), in which the apostate city of Jerusalem is destroyed. Ezekiel 23 presents the story of the two harlot sisters “Oholah” (Samaria, 23:5–10) and “Oholibah” (Jerusalem, 23:11–35), who are indicted for their sins and then punished (cf. Jer. 3:6–11, where Israel and Judah are depicted as adulterous wives of Yahweh). The passage here spans the two passages dealing with the punishment of the harlot Jerusalem (Ezek. 23:22–27, 28–35), as the former lovers turn against

the prostitute so that she “will be consumed by fire,” and they will “strip you of your clothes . . . deal with you in hatred . . . leave you naked and bare” (23:25–29). To the gruesome images of Ezekiel, John adds “devour her flesh,” a reference to the total annihilation of the harlot-city. Ezekiel’s prophecy came true in the Babylonian conquest of Judea. Here the “kings of the east” who at first join the forces of Babylon the Great (Rev. 16:12–16) now turn against her and devour her. This is the only reference in the book to Babylon the Great being destroyed by allies turning against her. Elsewhere it is pestilence and plague (the trumpets and bowls; cf. 18:8) and especially the rider on the white horse (19:13–15). Yet this is part of the actions of chapter 19, as will be seen in 17:17 below. God causes the vassal kings to turn against the final unholy Roman empire as a prelude to the coming of the conquering ram/wrath of the Lamb. All three elements—betrayal, plagues, parousia—are part of the same sovereign plan of God by which he will bring world history with all its depravity to an end.

The three metaphors are powerful depictions of judgment. To be “stripped naked” builds on the warning of Laodicea that she should buy white garments to “cover your shameful nakedness” and the further admonition of Jesus in 16:15 that the believers “keep their clothes on, so that they might not walk around naked and people see their shame.” The “naked” imagery refers to the exposure of one’s sinful deeds. The image of “flesh devoured” (echoing the fate of Jezebel, who was eaten by dogs, 2 Kings 9:36–37) looks ahead to the carrion birds who are invited to “eat the flesh of kings and the flesh of generals and the flesh of mighty men and the flesh of horses and their riders and the flesh of free and slave and of the small and the great” (Rev. 19:17–18, 21). This parallels the terrible judgment of Ezek. 23:22–25, as God turns the harlot-city Jerusalem over to the Babylonians for destruction. The irony is that there it is Babylon that does the destroying, while here Babylon is destroyed. Finally, the phrase “consume her with fire” (a priest’s daughter who became a prostitute was to be “burned in the fire,” Lev. 21:9) pictures not only the fire that always accompanies conquest but also the lake of fire in which they will be “tormented day and night forever and ever” (20:10).

Beale (1999: 885–86) points out the parallels with Jezebel (cf. 2:20–23) and argues that the image here is not just of the earth-dwellers but also of the apostate church (see also 21:8, “the cowardly”). The pictures of judgment in Ezek. 16, 23, and other OT passages with harlot imagery (2 Chron. 21:11–15; Isa. 1:21–25; 57:3; Jer. 2:20; 3:1; 13:27; Hos. 2:2–5; 4:12–18; 5:4; 9:1; Mic. 1:7) would provide a natural parallel to the problem of the Christian cults in the Apocalypse (2:2, 6, 14–15, 20–23). In this book those who have joined the apostate church become members of the earth-dwellers and face the same eternal punishment as the other enemies of God (see also Mark 13:5, 21–23 par.; 2 Thess. 2:3; 1 Enoch 93.8–10; Jub. 23.14–21).

Yet all of this is under the sovereign control of God. We have already seen that even the actions of the evil powers can occur only when God authorizes them (seen in the “was given” of 6:1–8 and 13:5–8). Thus, it is not surprising that we learn here that the civil war occurs ὁ γὰρ θεὸς ἔδωκεν εἰς τὰς καρδίας αὐτῶν ποιῆσαι τὴν γνώμην αὐτοῦ (*ho gar theos edōken eis tas kardias autōn poiēsai tēn gnōmēn autou*, for God has put it into their hearts to accomplish his purpose). The repetition of the “given” motif emphasizes the absolute control of God over the forces of evil. The aorist ἔδωκεν added to the future tense verbs of 17:16 is proleptic, describing “an event that is not yet past as though it were already completed” (Wallace 1996: 563), in other words, stressing the certainty of the coming event. As Aune (1998b: 958) says, “put it in the heart” is an ancient idiom for divine guidance (Exod. 35:34; Neh. 2:12; 7:5; Ezra 7:27; 1 Esdr. 8:25). In Rev. 17:13 and again here, the kings are μίαν γνώμην (*mian gnōmēn*, of one mind/purpose) with the beast; now they are inspired by God

to do *his* “purpose” (also *γνώμην*). In short, in the earthly sense they are in complete accord with their own wicked plans, but in the cosmic sense they are forced to “do God’s purpose.” The divine will they are accomplishing is “to give their kingdom to the beast,” a repeat of 17:13, where they “give their power and authority to the beast.” The reason God raises them up is to help the beast launch his final act of desperation so as to bring this age to a close.

In all of this, the ultimate purpose is that *τελεσθήσονται οἱ λόγοι τοῦ θεοῦ* (*telesthēsontai hoi logoi tou theou*, the words of God will be fulfilled). In the narrow sense, this goes back to 17:1, where John was promised “the judgment of the great prostitute.” In a broader sense, this goes back to the promise of the vindication of the saints in 6:9–11. In 10:7 we are told that “the mystery of God will be completed, just as he announced to his servants the prophets” at the sounding of the seventh trumpet. Thus, in the broadest sense, this points to the fulfillment of all the promises regarding the eschaton and final judgment throughout the Word of God. That would especially be seen in the plural *οἱ λόγοι τοῦ θεοῦ*, which points to all the prophecies, not just the one of this chapter. The final end of all who oppose God throughout history and especially at the end of history has long been seen in God’s Word. In other words, the Antichrist and his followers will be participating not only in their own defeat but in what God had planned all along.

The final element of the vision (17:18) that the angel interprets (and the fourth of the series: 17:8, 9–11, 12–14, 18) is that which we have realized all along—the woman is *ἡ πόλις ἡ μεγάλη* (*hē polis hē megalē*, the great city) of 16:19 and 18:10, 18, 19, 21, Babylon the Great/Rome. There is an *inclusio* here: the first thing John saw in the vision is the last thing interpreted by the angel. It is probably placed last to provide a natural transition to the judgment of the “great city” in chapter 18, expanding the destruction of 17:16 and answering the promise of 17:1, “I will show you the judgment of the great prostitute.” The demise of the great prostitute here shows the difficulty of the strict preterist view, for one would have to add that the prophecy never came true, since Rome lasted another four centuries. One would have to say that the Germanic and Gothic tribes who much later attacked and sacked Rome were part of the ten kings or that Jerusalem was the woman who ruled the earth in the sense God had given her that position over the rest of the world (Ps. 48:2–3; Lam. 2:15; Zech. 14:16–21; Mic. 4:1–3; so Ford 1975b: 293; Chilton 1987: 442–43). However, this certainly stretches the parameters of the imagery here. Rome did not face anything like imminent attack by its vassal kings, and Jerusalem did not have any control whatsoever over the rest of the world. What is possible again is to combine the preterist, idealist, and futurist views. This is primarily a prophecy of the final evil Babylon established by the Antichrist, but it still considers Rome the basis for the imagery and also embraces all the Rome-like cities of history. As Mounce (1998: 321) says, “Every great center of power that has prostituted its wealth and influences restores to life the spirit of ancient Babylon.” The repulsive immorality, idolatry, luxury, and misuse of power that characterized Rome has been reproduced many times throughout history; and we must all recognize the same depravity in our way of life today.

Summary and Contextualization

The overwhelming feeling one gets from chapter 17 concerns the incredible sovereignty of God. After all the machinations and depraved acts of the powers of evil recorded in this chapter, we realize that God has superintended the entire operation and even “put it into their hearts to accomplish his purpose” by turning on the prostitute Babylon the Great and destroying her. The majesty and wisdom of God are beyond compare, and the promise we see here for beleaguered

Christians everywhere is a pearl beyond price.

The final section before the return of Christ (17:1–19:4) begins with a vision of the “great prostitute” who symbolizes seductive Rome and all self-centered empires of history, including our own. The same angel that had loosed the bowl judgments (17:1) promises John that he would see this same judgment fall on the harlot Rome. What sets this chapter off by itself in the book is that here the angel interprets the elements of the vision for John, and this provides the basis for understanding the symbols of all the visions. We realize the sins of Rome/evil nations in the description of 17:3–6 (blasphemous idolatry, seductive luxury, immorality) and worse, that she had prostituted herself by enticing the other nations into committing the same sins. The emphasis on luxury prepares for chapter 18, where the luxury of Rome will come to the fore. We must all consider 17:4b, where we are told that such things (and materialism is the main thrust of v. 4a) are loathsome filth to God. Her judgment is all the worse because she was the “mother” of such things who passed them on to all her progeny (17:5) and because she had become “drunk with the blood of the saints” (v. 6). God had promised his martyred people that he would avenge their blood (6:9–11), and that vengeance is soon to come (17:16–17; chap. 18).

The explanation of the beast (17:8) focuses not just on his counterfeit resurrection (“was, is not, and will come”) that brings him to power and causes the world to worship him (13:4, 12–14) but even more on his certain end. He will “go to destruction,” repeated in 17:8, 11, then foretold in 17:14, where the Lamb “conquers” him. God is sovereign, and his doom is absolutely guaranteed. The related aspects of the beast (the seven heads and ten horns, 17:9–14) tell how he comes to power (the final world ruler who emerges from the others) and how he gains control over the world (the ten vassal kings give him their “power and authority”) as well as his final goal (to go to war against the Lamb) but again focus on his certain destruction (17:11) and final defeat (conquered by the Lamb, 17:14). On the other hand, our victory in Christ is certain, for he is “Lord of lords and King of kings.” We will participate in the final battle and ultimate defeat of the powers of evil (17:14b; cf. 2:26–27; 19:14).

Finally, we see the true attitude of the demonic powers toward their followers as the beast and the vassal kings turn on the woman and destroy her (17:16–17; cf. 9:1–19). God causes the self-destructive nature of evil to come full circle and reenacts the civil war of 6:3–4, as Babylon the Great is destroyed by the very powers she serves. Satan has always hated all of God’s created beings, so now God causes the beast and the kings to do what they really want to do: utterly destroy the woman. This accomplishes God’s purpose—*lex talionis* (law of retribution), as all the evil done by Babylon the Great brings about her final destruction. Thus, “God’s words” throughout the history of his people prophesying final judgment of evil are now “fulfilled.”

Additional Note

17:1. πόρνη: Pippin (1992) has provided a deconstructive and feminist reading of the Apocalypse in which she has sought to unlock the gender codes and unmask both the oppressive view of women in the book and the Western biases that provide a male-centered political interpretation of the book. She believes the book focuses on disaster and death rather than on salvation and that it contains a misogynist substratum that “reads the lives” of the females in the book in terms of death and destruction. This is nowhere better seen than in the destruction of “the whore of Babylon” in chapter 17. Several criticisms must be leveled. Schüssler Fiorenza (1993) contrasts her own apologetic/positive view of the book with the generalizations of Pippin’s deconstructive/critical reading and her tendency to turn the symbols into “real” women. Schüssler Fiorenza reads the sexual metaphor of whoring as a “conventional metaphor.” It is better to read it as gender-inclusive than gender-specific. Barr (1993) adds that in the Apocalypse war and disaster are “human endeavors to avoid God’s new world” and that the final battle is never described, because it “has already been won at the death of Jesus.” The divine warrior is actually the dying Savior. Also, the evil woman is always paired with an evil male: Jezebel/Balaam, whore/beast, and “masculine evil characters predominate.” There are

also more positive women in the book: the woman of chapter 12, the bride of chapter 19. In short, the Apocalypse is not repressive of women. The whore of Babylon is a symbol drawn from OT and Greco-Roman metanarrative rather than a misogynistic rejection of women. Pippin (1992: 80) says, “Having studied the evils of Roman imperial policy in the colonies, I find the violent destruction of Babylon very cathartic. But when I looked into the face of Babylon, I saw a woman.” She certainly speaks for many female readers of the book, but she makes too much of a literal reading in this instance. When we read of the “whore of Babylon,” we should read an ancient symbol for immorality and religious apostasy.

2. Fall of Babylon the Great (18:1–24)

The destruction of the great prostitute/Babylon the Great in 17:16 is now expanded into a full-fledged vision, further fulfilling the promise of the angel in 17:1 that he would “show [John] the judgment of the great prostitute.”^[1] The overarching theme of this section is the judgment on Babylon/Rome for its economic oppression. C. Smith (1990c: 28–29) sees this in the way the angelic proclamation (vv. 1–3, 21–24) frames the three laments (vv. 9–19) with economic condemnation. Callahan (1999: 46) calls this chapter “a critique in apocalyptic idiom of the political economy of ancient Rome,” tying it to the “network of maritime luxury trade that supported Roman domination of the Mediterranean basin.” John accomplishes this by using every anti-Babylon oracle (along with those against Nineveh and Tyre) in the OT (esp. Jer. 50–51) as a historical analogue (49). There are four major parts: (1) A descending angel announces the fall of Babylon the Great and details the reasons for the judgment (18:1–3). (2) Then a voice from heaven commands the true believers to flee and describes the judgment in terms of *lex talionis* (the law of retribution, 18:4–8). She is guilty of seduction and adultery (18:3) as well as self-glory, luxury, and pride (18:7) and so faces a “double portion” of judgment (18:6). (3) Then the voice goes on to describe the three funeral laments of the kings, the merchants, and those who live by the sea trade in order to picture poignantly the effects of that virtually instantaneous (“one hour,” 18:10, 17, 19) destruction (18:9–19). In an important ironic contrast, the final lament (v. 19) is set against the command for heaven and the righteous to rejoice at the justice of divine judgment (v. 20). (4) Finally, the violent destruction and the resultant desolation are symbolically depicted and poetically celebrated by a mighty angel (18:21–24). Here two other reasons for judgment are found: leading the world astray (v. 23) and murdering the saints (v. 24).

The second section is multifaceted. The voice from heaven states all of 18:4–20, but that message has three parts, thereby effectively giving five parts to the chapter—18:1–3, 4–8, 9–19, 20, 21–24. The sequence of the action is quite natural: the fall is announced; the righteous are told to flee; the participants who “drank of the wine that leads to passion for her immorality” (14:8; cf. 17:2, 4) lament her destruction as the saints rejoice in the justice of God; and finally, the violent destruction and its aftermath takes place. The multiplicity of forms is also interesting. We begin with a prophetic doom saying (18:1–3) and proceed to an ethical imperative followed by a series of judgment oracles (18:4–8). Then come the three funeral dirges (18:9–19) followed by the startling command to rejoice based on divine justice. Finally, we have another prophetic acted parable (cf. 10:8–10) in 18:21a and an interpretation of that action in terms of a judgment oracle focusing on all that has departed from the life of the city (18:21b–24).

- a. Angel announces the fall of Babylon (18:1–3)
- b. Heavenly voice commands believers to leave (18:4–8)
 - i. Command to leave (18:4)
 - ii. Basis of judgment (18:5)
 - iii. Just judgment explained (18:6–8)
- c. Three laments over Babylon the Great (18:9–19)
 - i. Lament of kings of the earth (18:9–10)
 - ii. Lament of merchants (18:11–17a)

- iii. Lament of sea captains and sailors (18:17b–19)
- d. Call for the heavens and saints to rejoice (18:20)
- e. Destruction of Babylon (18:21–24)

Exegesis and Exposition

¹After these things I saw another angel descending from heaven, having great authority, and the earth was illumined with his glory. ²And he cried out with a strong voice,
“Fallen, fallen, is Babylon the Great.
It has become a home for demons,
a prison for every unclean spirit
and a prison for every unclean and hateful bird.
³For all the nations have fallen because of the wine that leads to passion for her immorality.
The kings of the earth have committed adultery with her,
and the merchants of the earth have grown wealthy because of the power of her luxuries.”
⁴Then I heard another voice from heaven saying,
“Come out from her, my people,
lest you share in her sins,
lest you receive her plagues,
⁵because her sins have reached to heaven,
and God has remembered her crimes.
⁶Give back to her as she has given.
In fact, pay her back double according to her deeds;
give her a double portion in the cup she has mixed.
⁷To the degree that she has glorified herself and lived in sensuous luxury,
to the same degree give her torment and sorrow.
For in her heart she said,
‘I sit as a queen,
I am not a widow,
I will never see grief.’
⁸Because of this her plagues will come in one day,
pestilence and grief and famine,
and she will be burned with fire,
because mighty is the Lord God who has judged her.”
⁹Then the kings of the earth who committed adultery and lived in sensuous luxury with her will weep and wail over her when they see the smoke of her burning. ¹⁰They stand far off because they are afraid of being tormented with her and say,
“Woe, woe, great city,
Babylon, mighty city,
because in one hour your judgment has come.”
¹¹The merchants of the earth weep and mourn over her, because no one will buy their cargo any longer: ¹²cargo of gold, silver, precious stones, and pearls; of fine linen, purple, silk, and scarlet fabrics; of every kind of citron wood, every type of ivory product, every type of costly wood, bronze, iron, and marble; ¹³of cinnamon, spice, incense, myrrh, and frankincense; of wine, olive oil, fine flour, and wheat; of cattle, sheep, horses, and carriages; of bodies, that is, human souls.
¹⁴“The fruit you lusted after has gone away from you.
All the expensive and beautiful things have disappeared from you.
They will no longer be found.”
¹⁵These merchants who have become wealthy from her will stand far off because they are afraid of being tormented with her, weeping and mourning ¹⁶and saying,
“Woe, woe, great city,
clothed in fine linen, purple, and scarlet,
and glittering with gold, precious stones, and pearls;
¹⁷for in one hour all this wealth has been made desolate.”
Every sea captain and everyone who sails to a place, the sailors and as many as make their living from the sea, stand far off ¹⁸and cry out when they see the smoke of her burning, saying, “Who is like this great city?” ¹⁹They throw dust on their heads and cry out, weeping and mourning, saying,
“Woe, woe, great city
where all those who had ships in the sea became rich because of her wealth,

in one hour you have been made desolate.”

²⁰“Rejoice over her, heaven, and the saints, apostles, and prophets,
for God has judged her for the way she judged you.”

²¹Then a mighty angel took a stone like a large millstone and cast it into the sea, saying,
“In this way Babylon, the great city, will be cast down with sudden violence,
never to be found again.

²²The sound of harpists, musicians, flutists, and trumpeters will never be heard in you again.
No craftsman of any trade will ever be found in you again.
The sound of a millstone will never be heard in you again.

²³The light of a lamp will never shine in you again.
The voice of bridegroom and bride will never be heard in you again.
Your merchants were the great men of the earth;
all the nations were deceived by your sorcery.

²⁴In her was found the blood of the prophets and saints
and of all who have been killed on the earth.”

a. Angel Announces the Fall of Babylon (18:1–3)

Aune (1998b: 976) calls this a “prophetic taunt song,” beginning with the angel announcing the “death” but with overtones of joy at the judgment (see 1 Sam. 17:43–44; Isa. 23:15–16; 37:22–29). The introductory *μετὰ ταῦτα εἶδον* (*meta tauta eidon*, after these things I saw) always indicates a transition to a new section (4:1; 7:1, 9; 15:5; 18:1; 19:1). Here “another angel” (after the angel of chap. 17) is seen *καταβαίνοντα ἐκ τοῦ οὐρανοῦ* (*katabainonta ek tou ouranou*, descending from heaven—another present tense participle dynamically stressing the action), probably in contrast to the beast “ascending from the abyss” in 17:8. Also in contrast to the beast, this angel has two characteristics. First, he possesses *ἐξουσίαν μεγάλην* (*exousian megalēn*, great authority), compared to the derived authority of the beast (from the dragon, 13:2, and from God, 13:5). Second, *ἡ γῆ ἐλωπίσθη ἐκ τῆς δόξης αὐτοῦ* (*hē gē ephōtisthē ek tēs doxēs autou*, the earth was illumined with his glory), while the members of the false trinity do not possess “glory” in the Apocalypse. In fact, no celestial being, angelic or demonic, has “glory” in the book except here. Therefore, it is likely that the angel reflects the glory of God, implying he has come directly from the divine presence.

In 10:1 the “mighty angel” who also “ascended from heaven” was “clothed in a cloud, and a rainbow was upon his head. His face was like the sun, and his legs were like fiery pillars.” Both there and here, the angels reflect the power and splendor of God, especially his authority over earthly affairs (in 10:2 he “placed his right foot on the sea and his left on the land,” indicating control over this world). Also, in both places some scholars believe we have Christ rather than an angel. Gundry (1994: 670) calls 10:1 and 18:1–2 instances of “angelomorphic christology” and notes the extent to which the description here repeats characteristics of Christ elsewhere. The descent from heaven looks back to 10:1, the great authority to 12:10, enlightening the earth to the New Jerusalem of 21:1–4, and the strong voice to 10:3. Thus, he sees this as an actual appearance of Jesus. But as stated at 10:1, there is too little evidence that language used of angels in the Apocalypse ever refers to Christ; it is more likely that it always refers to celestial beings.

Most agree that Ezek. 43:2 is echoed here, “The land was radiant with his glory.” In Ezek. 43 the measurements of the temple have been completed (42:15–20), and now a solemn procession occurs as Yahweh enters the restored temple through the east gate (43:1). Here the glory of God once more returns to the temple (43:2–9) and illumines the whole earth (43:2). In that narration, Israel is reminded of the past and warned of future judgments if she persists in her sin (43:3, 7–9). The twin motifs of Yahweh’s glorious presence and the warnings of judgment are also present here, and it is likely that John intended these parallels to Ezek. 43. Some (Beale 1999: 893, following Sweet 1979:

266) also believe that this anticipates Rev. 21:10–11, the New Jerusalem that is also based in part on Ezek. 40–48. “The desolation of Babylon thus prepares the way for God to dwell in the new creation” (Beale 1999: 893).

The angel in 18:2 cries out in ἰσχυρᾷ ᾠῇ (*ischyra phōnē*, a strong voice—found only here but compare “a great voice” in 5:2; 10:3; 16:1; etc.) in keeping with his authoritative pronouncement and repeats the message of the second angelic herald in 14:8, “Fallen, fallen is Babylon the Great” (with the aorist emphasizing the certainty of the event). As stated there, this alludes to Isa. 21:9a, where Isaiah prophesied the destruction of Babylon via a messenger in a chariot who cries, “Babylon has fallen, has fallen,” followed by “all the images of its gods lie shattered on the ground” (21:29b). Thus, the judgment on the empire includes the destruction of its idols, specifically the Antichrist, who has set up an idol of himself (Rev. 13:14–15). Moreover, it is not seen as a new announcement but one foretold by Isaiah himself, grounded in God’s eternal decree.

The absolute desolation of Babylon/Rome^[2]/the empire of the beast is then described in three parallel poetic lines. Mounce (1998: 324) notes that “a major poetic feature in this section is the repeated sets of three lines.” This is the first of several. The depiction of it as a deserted city inhabited by demons and unclean birds is taken from Isa. 13:21–22 (Babylon); 34:11–14 (Edom); Jer. 50:39; 51:37 (both Babylon); Zeph. 2:14–15 (Assyria). All these depict the destruction of those cities that have flaunted God’s laws and fallen under his judgment. First, Babylon is κατοικητήριον δαιμονίων (*katoikētērion daimoniōn*, a home for demons; δαιμονίων is a subjective genitive meaning demons now “make their home” there), the direct opposite of the only other place the term occurs in the NT, Eph. 2:22, where Christians are “dwelling places of God.” Often in biblical literature, demons live in deserts or lonely places (Isa. 34:14; Tob. 8:3; Matt. 12:43 par.). The meaning of this is expanded in the next two lines, where Babylon is transformed into a φυλακή (*phylakē*, prison), an unusual term for “lair, haunt,” derived from the ancient view of “the underworld as the prison of evil spirits” (Kratz, *EDNT* 3:441). First, it becomes the prison house^[3] of “every unclean spirit,” the basic term in Jewish literature for demons as detestable creatures. Second, it is the prison house of “every unclean and hateful bird,”^[4] building on the presence of scavenger birds (hence the “hateful”) in Isa. 13:21 (par. 34:11) and preparing for the carrion birds of Rev. 19:17–18, 21 who will feast on the bodies of the Antichrist’s army.

The reason (ὅτι, *hoti*, for) for this terrible judgment in 18:3 is the sins of the wicked, again found in three lines, with the three groups anticipating the three of verses 9–19 but with “nations” instead of “sea captains.” The first line is drawn from 14:8 and 17:2 but alters the “made to drink the wine” of 14:8 to ἐκ τοῦ οἴνου . . . πέπτωκαν (*ek tou oinou . . . peptōkan*, have fallen because of; cf. the additional note on 18:3). This is more in keeping with the context. First, the angel announces the “fall” of Babylon/Rome and then proclaims that “all the nations have fallen because of the wine that leads to passion for her immorality”^[5] (for the meaning of the last clause see the discussion at 14:8). In other words, the nations will be destroyed along with the evil empire because they have freely participated in her debauchery. In 17:5 Rome is “the mother of prostitutes and abominations,” leading her offspring, the nations, to fall into the same depravity. Now they are both destroyed because of those evil acts. In a wonderful play on words, “drinking the wine that leads to passion (τοῦ θυμοῦ) for her immorality” in 14:8 results in “drinking the wine of the wrath (τοῦ θυμοῦ) of God” in 14:10. The results of this divine wrath are now displayed. As in 14:10, this probably alludes to Jer. 25:15–18, 27–28; Isa. 51:17; and Zech. 12:2, where God commands that the nations get drunk on his wrath after drinking the cup of sin. As throughout Revelation, “immorality” refers to both sexual immorality and religious apostasy (esp. idolatry).

The second line virtually repeats the first: the “kings” of the nations have led their people in immorality and idolatry. Some (Beale 1999: 895; Aune 1998b: 988) believe that this line alludes to Isa. 23:17 (where Tyre is condemned as a “prostitute” selling herself to “all the kingdoms of the earth” for profit, a commercial rather than a religious metaphor) and that therefore this is more a commercial than a religious image. In favor of this, the OT “prostitute” language is tied closely with the idea of Israel as the wife of Yahweh, a metaphor that does not fit the relation of Babylon to Yahweh. But that is to take the imagery too tightly. Throughout the book, adultery is used as a symbol for religious apostasy. Therefore, this is more likely a religious metaphor, and the commercial imagery does not come to the fore until the third line. The Isaianic reference to Tyre would be one among many parallels to this (see the passages listed at 14:8; 17:2), and while the economic side would be included, it is not explicit in the second line.

The third line introduces one of the major themes of the chapter—the sin of materialistic luxury. Οἱ ἔμποροι (*hoi emporoi*, the merchants) occurs four times in the book, all in chapter 18 (vv. 3, 11, 15, 23), and elsewhere only in Matt. 13:45 (a merchant looking for a pearl). These were wholesale dealers (EDNT 1:446) who traveled all over the Roman world selling merchandise in huge quantities. They “have grown wealthy” from all the trade (see also 18:15, 23). C. Smith (1990c: 30) says these merchants engaged in “unrestrained debauchery,” by which he means excess consumption of goods, with gross ostentation the order of the day. Moreover, the Romans used their wealth for social control over their subjects. It was often said that Rome conquered the world as much through its merchants as through its armies. Like all tyrannical governments, Rome grew enormously “fat” by exploiting the conquered nations, for most of their goods benefited Rome far more than themselves. Naturally, Rome’s merchant class grew rich. Oakman (1993: 203–9) describes the situation. The Roman economy was based on (1) the forced extraction of goods and taxes to support the imperial bureaucracy, and (2) the movement of goods out of the provinces to support the elite. Thus, all commerce moved toward Rome and tended to underwrite the power structure. Even the imperial cult was part of this by choosing their honorary priests from among the elite. The wealthy had power over all agricultural and commercial goods and used them to profit the cities. The commoners barely had a subsistence living and survived through loans as their debts grew.

Much of the material in chapter 18 relates to Ezek. 27, a lament for Tyre. As Block (1998: 51) says, “This island city, renowned for maritime commercial enterprises, is imagined as a magnificent merchant ship loaded with the products of the world, only to be shipwrecked on the high seas.” Thus, it is a perfect type of Rome and a perfect picture for the destruction of Rome. Ezekiel 27:12–25 centers mostly on the trade of Tyre, and 27:12 is close to the text here, “Tarshish did business with you because of your great wealth of goods.” Here the merchants grow rich ἐκ τῆς δυνάμεως τοῦ στήνους αὐτῆς (*ek tēs dynamēōs tou strēnous autēs*, because of the power of her luxuries), taking τοῦ στήνους with Beale (1999: 896) as a genitive of source. Rome seduced the nations due to her incredible wealth and the luxurious living it purchased. This bound them to Rome more securely by far than its armies could, for wealth brought them into the Roman fold willingly. Edgar (1982: 338) believes that Babylon the Great is not a religious but an economic symbol, as seen in the merchants who symbolize the kings of the earth (18:23). Thus, chapter 18 focuses on the economic sins of Rome and the luxurious ostentation that brings about the wrath of God.

b. Heavenly Voice Commands Believers to Leave (18:4–8)

i. Command to Leave (18:4)

The other “voices from heaven” have occurred in 10:4, 8 and 14:2, 13, and refer to a direct message from the throne itself (God or Christ; [6] see 10:4). This voice commands, Ἐξέλθατε ὁ λαός μου ἐξ αὐτῆς (*Exelthate ho laos mou ex autēs*, Come out from her, my people). Only here and in 21:3 are believers called God’s “people,” a semitechnical term in the OT and NT indicating a special relationship with God. The command to separate oneself from depraved society is frequent in the OT (Isa. 48:20; 52:11; Jer. 50:8; 51:45, 50; Ezek. 20:41) and NT (e.g., 2 Cor. 6:14, 17). The theme is more than just physically fleeing the city. In the narrative picture of Rev. 18, it means to get out of the city lest they be destroyed with the pagans. But the extent to which this command was addressed to the saints in the cities of Asia would indicate it was also meant to be taken spiritually. The saints/holy ones are to separate themselves (the very meaning of “holiness”) from the things of the world. This is at the heart of the theme of ethical faithfulness and perseverance in the Apocalypse (e.g., 16:15; 21:7–8).

Christians are to “flee the evil desires of youth” (2 Tim. 2:22), lest they “share in her sins” and thereby “receive her plagues.” [7] Aune (1998b: 991–92) rightly sees a chiasm in the unusual Greek order (with the prepositional phrase in the second clause placed before the ἵνα clause):

A ἵνα μὴ συγκοινωνήσητε (*hina mē synkoinōnēsēte*, lest you share)

B ταῖς ἁμαρτίαις αὐτῆς (*tais hamartiais autēs*, in her sins)

B’ καὶ ἐκ τῶν πληγῶν αὐτῆς (*kai ek tōn plēgōn autēs*, and of her plagues)

A’ ἵνα μὴ λάβητε (*hina mē labēte*, lest you receive)

The poetic format heightens the connection between the two clauses. There is a cause-effect relationship. Those who “participate in her sins” will by the laws of divine justice share her punishment. There are several parallels, for instance the command to Lot to leave Sodom “or you will be swept away when the city is punished” (Gen. 19:15, 17). When Lot’s wife “looked back” (19:26, by which she “identified herself with the damned town” [Wenham 1994: 59]), she too “shared in their plague.” In Jer. 50:8–9 the people of God are commanded to “flee out of Babylon” because God was about to destroy her; and in 51:45 they are told to “run for your lives! Run from the fierce anger of the LORD” soon to fall on Babylon. In Eph. 5:11 the believers are told to “have nothing to do with [8] the fruitless deeds of darkness” but instead to “expose them.” In Rev. 21:7–8 the overcomers (those who refuse to participate) will “inherit” the New Jerusalem, while the “cowardly” (those who do participate) will take “their place in the fiery lake of burning sulfur” with the other sinners. In other words, they will “receive her plagues.”

ii. Basis of Judgment (18:5)

Callahan (1999: 58–59) says that 18:4b is the divine command, with 18:5 the author’s interpretation explaining why the Christians must distance themselves or be implicated in the judgment (modeled on Jer. 51:45). The reason for this danger (ὅτι, *hoti*, because) is that the sins of Babylon the Great ἐκολλήθησαν . . . ἄχρι τοῦ οὐρανοῦ (*ekollēthēsan . . . achritou ouranou*, have reached to heaven). This is an interesting choice of verb, for κολλάω normally means to “unite” or “cling to” something (a near synonym to “share” in 18:4), but here it means to “come in close contact with” or “touch” the sky (BAGD 441), a strong image that reminds one of the tower of Babel that the foolish people built to reach “to the heavens” (Gen. 11:4). Here, though, it alludes again to Jer. 51,

where the judgment of Babylon “reaches to the skies, it rises as high as the clouds” (51:9). The sins of the nations are a vast heap that have piled up to the heavens, that is, to God himself. Therefore, ἐμνημόνευσεν ὁ θεὸς τὰ ἀδικήματα αὐτῆς (*emnēmoneusen ho theos ta adikēmata autēs*, God has remembered her crimes). Normally this verb commands the people of God to “remember” their past relations with God (see Rev. 2:5; 3:3), but here it is God “remembering” the transgressions of Babylon. When God “remembers,” he acts (part of the meaning of the verb). When he remembers his people, he works on their behalf (Ps. 105:8–11; 111:5–6; Ezek. 16:60); when he remembers sin (Ps. 109:14; Jer. 14:10; Hos. 8:13; 9:9), he acts in judgment. In Rev. 16:19 “God remembered Babylon the Great and gave her the cup of wine, namely his furious wrath.” The term for sin here, τὰ ἀδικήματα, refers to “unrighteous deeds” or “crimes.” While there is definitely a religious aspect here, in Acts 18:14 and 24:20 (the only other NT occurrences of the term) it has a legal connotation of criminal activity, and that is probably the primary thrust here as well. The wrath of God is a judicial response to the “crimes” of wicked humanity.

iii. Just Judgment Explained (18:6–8)

This section is dominated by the *lex talionis* (law of retribution) theme. Since the sins of Babylon have “piled up to the heavens,” God will pay them back in kind. Schüssler Fiorenza (1991: 99) describes the scene well:

The whole scene could be likened to a universal courtroom, in which a class-action suit takes place. Plaintiffs in this suit are Christians together with all those killed on earth (18:24); the defendant is Babylon/Rome, who is charged with murder in the interest of power and idolatry; and the presiding judge is God. As announced previously in 14:8, Babylon/Rome has lost the lawsuit and therefore its associates break out in lamentation and mourning, while the heavenly court and Christians rejoice over the justice they have received.

God pronounces a legal sentence on Babylon/Rome/the empire of the beast in 18:6–8, perhaps given to the heavenly bailiff (see further the additional note on 18:6) who is to carry out the sentence. It contains both the sentence and the legal basis for the verdict, all expressed in terms of the Roman (and biblical) “law of retribution.” First, the severity of the sentence is described (18:6). The heavenly bailiff must ἀπόδοτε αὐτῇ ὡς καὶ αὐτὴ ἀπέδωκεν (*apodote autē hōs kai autē apedōken*, lit., “pay her back as she has paid back [to others]”). There can be no better definition of *lex talionis* than this. It is likely that this is taken from Jer. 50:29, where the judgment of Babylon is stated in similar terms, “Repay her for her deeds; do to her as she has done.” Yet there is a rich and varied history behind this. Jeremiah could well have been alluding to Ps. 137:8, which says of Babylon, “Happy is he who repays you for what you have done to us.” As Aune (1998b: 993) points out, there are many examples of “the retributive justice proverb, ‘each will be repaid . . . in accordance with his or her works’” (Ps. 28:4; Prov. 24:12; Isa. 3:11; Lam. 3:64; Sir. 16:12, 14; Ps. Sol. 2.34; 17.8; 1 Macc. 2:68; Rom. 2:6; 2 Cor. 11:15; 2 Tim. 4:14; 2 Clem. 17.4). Strand (1982a: 56) adds that this may well also allude to “the law of malicious witness” from Deut. 19:16–19, in which those who bear false witness (Babylon) will suffer the very penalty their slander has forced on others.

More difficult is the next command, “Pay her back double according to her deeds.” At first glance, this seems overly harsh, as if God has gone overboard in his vengeance, and justice has been forsaken. It has been common (Beckwith, Ladd, P. Hughes, Ford, Sweet, Kline 1989, Krodel, Chilton, Mounce, Thomas) to see this as meaning not a double punishment but a full or complete requital for Babylon’s crimes, on the grounds that διπλώσατε τὰ διπλᾶ (*dīplōsate ta dīpla*, pay back double) is a metaphor for full recompense rather than for twice the penalty. Kline (1989: 177)

argues that the two Hebrew words this translates in the LXX (כַּפָּל, *kāpal*, and מִשְׁנֵה, *mšneh*) favor the meaning “equivalent” for διπλόω here: “Babylon’s iniquities were to be balanced by their equal weight of punishment in God’s scales of justice.” In this sense, it means that God will pay them back fully for all they have done, in keeping with 14:10, which speaks of the “wine of the wrath of God that has been poured full strength into the cup of his anger” (cf. Isa. 40:2; Jer. 16:18; 17:18; Matt. 23:15; 1 Tim. 5:17). Yet at the same time, the idea of double the penalty was a common theme. In Exod. 22:4, 7, 9 certain transgressions demanded a double payment (a stolen animal, stealing, illegal possession of an animal), and the prophets did emphasize double retaliation (Isa. 40:2; Jer. 16:18; 17:18). Psalm 79:12 calls for a sevenfold retaliation. In Exod. 22 the double penalty for theft would be especially apt in light of the economic exploitation that is central to this chapter (so Callahan 1999: 59). Thus, this could be a call for a double portion of judgment due to the severity of the sins of the nations (see Chilton 1987: 450). On the added “according to her deeds,” see discussion at 2:23b; 14:12–13; 20:12, 13–15; 22:12. The “portion in the cup” refers back to the cup “filled with abominations, namely, the impurities of [the great harlot’s] immorality” in 17:4, which itself referred back to the cup with which she “made all the nations drink of the wine that leads to passion for her immorality” in 14:8. Thus, since she seduced the world into drinking the cup of sin, she must drink the cup of God’s wrath “full strength” (14:10).

The next two verses (18:7–8) give examples of this cup of sin and the full recompense that follows. The format (ὅσα . . . τοσοῦτον, *hosa . . . tosouton*) means “to the degree that . . . to the same degree . . .” (BAGD 586). Her sins are twofold here. First, she has “glorified herself” rather than God. Such arrogance is frequently derided in Scripture. Luke 14:11 says, “Those who exalt themselves will be humbled” (cf. 2 Sam. 22:28; Job 40:11; Prov. 3:34; 29:23; Isa. 2:12, 17; 5:15; 1 Pet. 5:6). Those who seek their own glory will not only lose all glory in the life to come but also face the judgment of God. One of the major themes of this book is that glory belongs only to God (see the introduction to 4:1–16:21), and all who refuse to acknowledge him will face his wrath. Second, she ἐστρηνίασεν (*estrēniasen*, has lived in sensuous luxury), a term that means both sensual and luxurious living (both aspects are probably present here). Their sensuality is expressed not only in immorality but in opulent living. This is another primary theme of the chapter, for both sensuality and materialism flow out of a self-centered greed that is the antithesis of holiness. Due to this sensual lifestyle, the avenging angel is to “give” (a cognate of “pay her back” in 18:6) her βασανισμόν καὶ πένθος (*basanison kai penthos*, torment and sorrow). In Revelation the first term occurs six times (9:5 [twice]; 14:11; 18:7, 10, 15) and its cognate verb five times (9:5; 11:10; 12:2; 14:10; 20:10), always of the “torment” awaiting those who stand against God. Five of the six times “sorrow” occurs (18:7, 8, 11, 15, 19; 21:4) are in this chapter, describing the “grief” that will attend the judgment of Babylon. “Grief” is obviously the result of the “torment,” but it is too late. If they had only “grieved” for their sins and repented, the “torment” would never have happened.

This self-centered attitude is expressed even more clearly in her boastful claim, stated in the typical three-line format: κάθημαι βασίλισσα καὶ χήρα οὐκ εἰμί καὶ πένθος οὐ μὴ ἴδω (*kathēmai basilissa kai chēra ouk eimi kai penthos ou mē idō*, I sit as a queen, I am not a widow, I will never see grief). There is an interesting contrast here, a prostitute claiming to be queen. One is reminded of Messalina, the wife of Claudius, whose sexual appetite was so prodigious that she would at times become a sacred prostitute in some of the temples. Widowhood was especially burdensome in the ancient world. “In early times the fate most feared and bewailed by a woman was that she should become a widow” (Stählin, *TDNT* 9:441–42). In the pagan world, a woman was not supposed to remarry and would often have to stay with her husband’s family in a bad situation. In the Jewish

world, she would inherit property only if she had no sons, and she would have no protector, thus being particularly vulnerable to fraud. In the NT, ministry to widows was considered a sign of “pure and faultless religion” (James 1:27), and there was even an official “order of widows” to oversee their needs (1 Tim. 5:3–16). This is taken from Isaiah’s prophecy against Babylon in 47:7–8, “You said, ‘I will continue forever [the eternal queen!] . . . I am, and there is none beside me. I will never be a widow.’ The judgment on this hubris^[9] is found in 47:9–11, “These will overtake you on a single day. . . . They will come upon you in full measure.” The parallels between these Isaianic themes and the rest of Rev. 18 are obvious (note the full recompense in 18:6, “one hour” in 18:10, 17, 19). Her pride and security will be revealed in all its delusion, and the “grief” (the second use of πένθος in this verse) she swore she would never “see” is soon to fall upon her. All such boasting will come to naught. A similar point is made by James in 4:13–17 where the merchants say, “Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money.” James responds, “Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. . . . You ought to say, ‘If it is the Lord’s will, we will live and do this or that.’ . . . All such boasting is evil.”

Because of this arrogant boasting, αἱ πληγαὶ αὐτῆς (*hai plēgai autēs*, her plagues) will come upon her (18:8), the same “plagues” that in 18:4 led to the call to believers to flee. Αὐτῆς is probably an objective genitive, “the plagues that will come on her.” Moreover, they will come ἐν μιᾷ ἡμέρᾳ^[10] (*en mia hēmera*, in one day), again echoing Isa. 47:9, where the judgment of Babylon was also to come “in a single day.” This came true when Darius killed Belshazzar and destroyed Babylon in a single day (Dan. 5:30). Still, as in all the numbers of Revelation, this is not meant to be taken literally but means the destruction will come “suddenly, in an instant” (Mounce 1998: 329 n. 26). The four “plagues” have all been seen before: πένθος (*penthos*, sorrow) occurs twice in 18:7 as God’s judgment on Babylon. Θάνατος . . . καὶ λιμός (*thanatos . . . kai limos*, pestilence and famine) are both found in the summary of the first four seals (6:8, “God gave [Death and Hades] authority over a quarter of the earth, to kill with sword, and with famine, and with pestilence, and by wild animals”). Since the “four horsemen of the Apocalypse” focus on the results of war, this is a natural image for the destruction of Babylon the Great. Finally, ἐν πυρὶ κατακαυθήσεται (*en pyri katakauthēsetai*, burned with fire) alludes back to 17:16 and the destruction of the great prostitute by the beast and his vassal kings (cf. Isa. 47:14, “fire will burn them up”). In the Noachian covenant, God promised he would never again destroy the world with water and symbolized that promise with a rainbow (Gen. 9:1–17). It would be fire that next would destroy the earth (2 Pet. 3:10, 12), and this is the harbinger of that final fiery cleansing.

As stated in Rev. 17:17, it is God who is in control, and he causes the depravity of Babylon the Great to turn upon her and destroy her. All these images of war function as they did in 6:1–8; lust for conquest and power must come full circle and self-destruct. That has been the history of sinful humankind from the beginning. Thus, the final point of this section is the ultimate cause: ὅτι ἰσχυρὸς κύριος ὁ θεὸς^[11] ὁ κρίνας αὐτήν (*hoti ischyros kyrios ho theos ho krinas autēn*, because mighty is the Lord God who has judged her). It is not the beast or his allies who are “mighty” but God alone, and this is proven in the virtually instantaneous destruction of the evil empire. While God is not called ἰσχυρὸς elsewhere in the Apocalypse (though his angels are in 5:2; 10:1), he is called “mighty” often in the LXX (2 Sam. 22:31–32, 48; Neh. 1:5; 9:31, 32; Job 36:22, 26; Ps. 7:12; Jer. 27:34 [50:34 MT]; 39:18 [32:18 MT]; Dan. 9:4; 2 Macc. 1:24), and there is a direct contrast with the pretentious “mighty city” of 18:10. God alone is “mighty,” and he is the sovereign “Judge.”

c. Three Laments over Babylon the Great (18:9–19)

The three funeral dirges are sung by three groups who profited most greatly from the largesse of Babylon/Rome: the kings who grew rich from her, the merchants who shared her expanding markets, and the shipping people who carried her cargo all over the world. Now they see her destruction and weep at the same time that they “stand far off” so they do not have to participate in her judgment. In other words, those who grew fat on her wealth now desert her in her time of agony. Aune (1998b: 978–79) points to four form-critical elements that the three laments have in common: each “stands far off”; each “weeps and wails”; each begins the lament with “woe, woe”; each exclaims on the suddenness (“in one hour”) of the destruction. These laments are again built on Ezek. 27, the lament over Tyre, the great maritime and commercial giant of Ezekiel’s day. Many of the details come from there, like the three groups of mourners themselves (27:29–36), their fear and sorrow, the list of cargo (Rev. 18:12–13 = Ezek. 27:12–24), and details in the lamentations (see below). While Babylon was the great power during that period and a natural symbol for Roman might and glory, Tyre was the shipping giant and commercial power, thus a natural symbol for that aspect of Rome. The purpose is to show the final end of those who participate in evil, the deep mourning for all that will be lost. Yet in this as well is the terrible hardness that depravity produces. None of these groups mourns their sin, only all the luxurious living they have lost. In other words, they remain self-centered to the bitter end. There is no true sorrow for Babylon, only sorrow for all they have lost.

i. Lament of Kings of the Earth (18:9–10)

The reason “the kings of the earth”^[12] weep over Babylon is twofold. First, οἱ μετ’ αὐτῆς πορνεύσαντες (*hoi met autēs porneusantes*, they have committed adultery with her), referring to the immorality and idolatry they have shared with Rome in 14:8; 17:2, 4; 18:3 (cf. 2:14, 20–21 [which would include the members of the licentious cult of the Nicolaitans in this]; 9:21; 19:2). They have lost their paramour and are bereft. Second, they have στρηνιάσαντες (*strēniasantes*, lived in sensuous luxury) with her, a reference back to the “sensuous luxury” condemned in 18:7 (note the verbal form there of the noun cognate). There had never been such extravagance as developed during the Pax Romana, and the kings of the earth shared in all this wealth gathered at the expense of the common people. As said in Ezek. 27:33, the “great wealth” of Babylon “enriched the kings of the earth.” Much of the rest of the chapter will focus on this sin.

The kings see τὸν καπνὸν τῆς πυρώσεως αὐτῆς (*ton kapnon tēs pyrōseōs autēs*, the smoke of her burning). In this book there is a contrast between smoke as incense and prayer (8:2–3) and smoke as a symbol of fiery judgment (9:17–18; 18:9, 18). The two aspects are combined in 14:11, where the “smoke of their torment rises [to God as incense] forever and ever.” This is part of the motif that says the judgment of the sinners is God’s answer to the prayers of his saints for vengeance and vindication. The kings, however, lament the destruction of their “gravy train.” Thus, they “weep and wail over her,” a sign of mourning and sorrow. This alludes to Ezek. 27:35, in which the kings “shudder with horror, and their faces are distorted with fear” at the destruction of Tyre.

Yet at the same time, they are ἀπὸ μακρόθεν ἑστηκότες^[13] (*apo makrothen hestēkotes*, standing far off) in 18:10, meaning that they distance themselves “far away” from the burning city. This is not out of respect but out of self-serving interest. They want nothing to do with the judgment διὰ τὸν φόβον τοῦ βασανισμοῦ αὐτῆς (*dia ton phobon tou basanismou autēs*, lit., “because of fear of her torment”), with τοῦ βασανισμοῦ αὐτῆς being an objective genitive and a genitive of accompaniment, respectively: “They were afraid of being tormented with her.” They too were guilty of the same sins and so tried to remove themselves as much as possible from the scene of

devastation, for they were terrified that they were next (they were right!).

Their cry is stereotypical. The three “woes” of the kings, merchants, and seamen repeat the three “woes” of the trumpet judgments (8:13; 9:12; 11:14) as well as the “woe” pronounced on the earth at the arrival of the enraged dragon in 12:12. There, however, it was a pronouncement of judgment, while here it is a cry of sorrow and horror at the judgment that has already come. Babylon is called ἡ πόλις ἡ ἰσχυρά (*hē polis hē ischyra*, mighty city), an extension of “great city” in the first line (and in 11:8; 16:19; 17:18) and in obvious contrast to the one who alone is truly “mighty,” the Lord God (18:8). This is similar to chapter 4, which emphasizes that God, not Caesar, dwells in approachable majesty and splendor. The rulers of the earth have been seduced by the earthly power and might of Rome and have ignored the evidence showing the temporary and partial nature of all such worldly splendor (note the emphatic repetition of the connection between “on the throne” and “who lives forever and ever” in 4:9–10).

Beale (1999: 907) notes the background behind the suddenness of the judgment (μῆϛ ὥρα, *mia hōra*, in one hour) in Dan. 4:17a, 19 LXX. There Nebuchadnezzar is told that God would make him temporarily deranged so that people might “know that the Most High is sovereign over the kingdoms of men.” Like Rome, Nebuchadnezzar in Dan. 4 arrogantly set himself up as a god and “refused to acknowledge God’s sovereignty.” Therefore, the “judgment” of Babylon has arrived suddenly. This is the judicial act of the “mighty . . . Lord . . . who judges” in 18:8. This is the third of four times κρίσις (*krisis*, judgment) occurs: the angel in 14:7 announces, “The hour of his judgment has come,” and in 16:7 “one from the altar” says, “Your judgments are true and just” (repeated verbatim in 19:2). Again theodicy is stressed, that is, the absolute justice of divine judgment. It is interesting that it is the kings who decry the “judgment” of Babylon, for it is they who have been the judges in this earthly sphere.

ii. Lament of Merchants (18:11–17a)

Now the “merchants,” wholesale dealers made rich through Roman trade (see v. 3), “weep and mourn” over the destruction of Babylon. While the kings weep and “wail,” the merchants and seamen weep and πενθοῦσιν^[14] (*penthousin*, mourn) over her, focusing on the “grief” (note the noun cognate in 18:7–8) they felt. This alludes to Ezek. 27:27, where the merchants and all on board the great ship Tyre “sink into the heart of the sea,” and 27:36, where the merchants “hiss” at the destruction, “an expression of intense grief” (Block 1998: 84 n. 190).

The reason for their sorrow again has no connection with love for Rome but rather is entirely focused on the loss of trade. As Bauckham (1993b: 373) points out, the merchants were usually citizens of the exporting cities and may even include the shipowners who sold cargoes at the ports (they are missing from the list in 18:17b). Nearly all the trade came to Rome via the sea. These merchants did not have high social status (the nobility did not sell but instead controlled the profits) but became quite wealthy. The amount of trade involved would be staggering, even by today’s standards. Rome was the first nation to develop a truly international market, with enormous profits coming from Africa, India, Arabia, and China in addition to the Roman world (see Beasley-Murray 1978: 267).

The list of cargoes in 18:12–13 is intended to demonstrate the kind of wealth involved in the lucrative trade. To some extent, it builds on the list in Ezek. 27:12–24 (fifteen of the twenty-nine items here are in Ezek. 27), but the list is exclusively Roman. As Bauckham (1993b: 351) shows, the arrangement of the two is quite different, with Ezekiel’s organized geographically by country and Revelation’s topically by types of cargo. Moreover, most of the items here were especially prized

by the Roman elite (see below). Bauckham (1993b: 366–67) also points out that of Pliny’s list of the twenty-seven most costly items in the empire (*Nat. Hist.* 37.204), eighteen are present here (in thirteen of the items listed, with some expanded into two or more in Pliny’s list: gold, silver, precious stones, pearls, purple, silk, scarlet, citron wood, ivory, cinnamon, amomum, myrrh, frankincense). Thus, the purpose here is to show why God’s wrath has descended on them—ostentatious, self-centered materialism. Provan (1996: 87–88) argues that this reflects not only the economic exploitation of Ezek. 27 but also the sin of luxurious living exemplified by Solomon in 1 Kings 4:26–28 and 10:26–29. The list is arranged in groups of four to six, with six categories of goods: precious stones and metals, luxurious fabrics, expensive wood and building materials, spices and perfumes, food items, animals and slaves.^[15] I often have students or churches read through this list of what was incredible luxury in Roman times and ask themselves this question: How many of these do I have in my home? This is a good lesson in the materialism of our own day. Let us consider each item in turn (combining the discussions in Swete; Mounce; Bauckham 1993b: 350–71; and Aune):

1. Precious stones and metals. “Gold” was the most important of the precious metals, imported primarily from Spain and then the Balkans in the second century A.D. In the first half of the first century, it was so prevalent as a sign of wealth (gold ceilings, shoe buckles, and jewelry) that wealthy Romans began to turn to silver. Possible sources of gold often determined nations that Rome would conquer, so voracious was their appetite. “Silver,” also from Spain, became the rage in the second half of the century, and couches and baths as well as serving plates were made of silver. It became a status symbol. “Precious stones” would include most in the lists of the book (4:3; 21:19–20) and came mostly from India. From the time of Pompey, who introduced them from his eastern conquests, they were used not only in women’s jewelry but also in drinking goblets and men’s rings. “Pearls” were considered the most luxurious of all jewels (along with diamonds) and came from the Red Sea (common pearls), the Persian Gulf (the most expensive), and India. Julius Caesar gave Servilia one worth \$18,000 in equivalent terms, and women began wearing them in such large quantities that they became a symbol of Roman decadence.

2. Luxurious fabrics. “Fine linen” refers to the clothing of the wealthy. A linen tunic from a famous garment center like Scythopolis could cost 7,000 denarii (one day’s wage was one denarius, so \$280,000 at \$40 a day). “Purple” cloth was especially expensive, for the dye was derived from the murex, a tiny shellfish, a drop at a time (so incredible numbers of the shellfish were needed for a single garment). Only the extremely wealthy could afford a silk, linen, or woolen garment (in order of price). Pliny called shellfish (the source of pearls and purple dye) the greatest source of moral corruption because their high cost was matched by the high demand in opulent Rome (*Nat. Hist.* 9.104–14, 124–28). “Silk” was imported from China both by ship and by an overland route from A.D. 90 to 130. While only women were supposed to wear it, Josephus spoke of Roman soldiers wearing silk at the triumphs of Vespasian and Titus (*J.W.* 7.5.4 §126). It became incredibly popular among the upper classes. “Scarlet” cloth was produced especially in Asia Minor and was favored by royalty (see 17:4 for the “purple and scarlet” worn by the great prostitute).

3. Expensive wood and building materials. Pliny thought “citron wood” (from a tree in North Africa) the most expensive of all (*Nat. Hist.* 13.91–102). It was known for its beautiful grain patterns, and its tables (often with ivory legs) were extremely popular among men, who would pay the equivalent of \$2.5 million (Cicero) or \$5 million (Gallus Asinius) for a single table. “Ivory” was so popular that the Syrian elephant was driven almost to extinction. It was used for sculptures (and idols), plates, chariots, and pieces of furniture. “Wood” would refer to other expensive woods used

for furniture, paneling, or sculpture, like maple, cyprus, or cedar. “Brass” or “bronze” was used for shields or furniture but especially for statues. Corinthian bronze was regarded as the best, and statues made of this were inordinately expensive. “Iron” from Greece and Spain was of course used for knives and swords but also for statues and ornaments. “Marble” came from Africa, Egypt, and Greece and was used not only for buildings and statues but also for plates, jars, and baths. It too was terribly expensive and came under imperial ownership to restrict it for Roman use.

4. Spices and perfumes. “Cinnamon” came either from eastern Africa or the Orient and was also quite expensive, used for perfume, incense, medicine, and a flavoring for wine. “Amomum,” or “spice,” was a fragrant spice shipped in from India, often used to make hair fragrant. “Incense” was made from several ingredients and used both in religious rites (see 5:8; 8:3–4) and for adding a sweet smell to rooms. “Myrrh” was imported from Somalia and was one of the most expensive and desired of the perfumes, also used as a medicine or a spice. It was used to anoint Jesus (Luke 7:37–38; Mark 14:3–5 par.) and was taken to anoint his corpse (Luke 23:56–24:1). “Frankincense” also came from Somalia. It was half the price of myrrh (six denarii per Roman pound versus twelve) and was often used with myrrh at funerals to disguise the smell of the decaying body. Gold and frankincense and myrrh were given to the baby Jesus by the magi (Matt. 2:11), showing that they regarded him as a king worthy of such expensive gifts.

5. Food items. For the most part, these were staples and not especially extravagant items. However, Rome was notorious for its extravagant banquets. It was said that Vitellius in one year spent the equivalent of \$20 million on food, primarily on lavish banquets. They would import food from all parts of the empire, serving expensive delicacies like the tongues of nightingales or the breasts of doves. “Wine” came primarily from Sicily and Spain and was highly profitable, so much so that many wealthy Romans would grow grapes rather than grain on their estates (see on 6:6 [“do not damage the oil and the wine”] for the problem this caused). “Olive oil” was another staple and was made in many places in the Mediterranean basin but was imported especially from Africa and Spain. “Wheat” was imported from Egypt and given free to about 200,000 male citizens (called the “grain dole”). The sheer size of Rome (nearly a million people) meant the rest of the empire suffered to supply the massive amounts (estimated at 80,000 tons annually) needed to feed the Roman populace. Bitterness was a natural result, and there were bread riots in Asia Minor around the time John was writing this. “Fine flour” was available (and affordable) only to the well-to-do.

6. Animals and slaves. The animals listed here are not those transported to Rome and other cities for the games (lions, elephants, wild bulls, etc.), nor were the “cattle” meant for food, since beef was not a popular meat in the Roman Empire. The cattle were used for work and for milk, the “sheep” to some extent for meat but more for wool. Thus, these animals were imported to improve the breeding stock of the wealthy estates. “Horses,” of course, had many uses. The best of them were used for chariot races, incredibly popular throughout the empire. They were also needed by the army and for work. Thus, there was a huge trade in horses. The “carriages” here are not so much the racing or military chariots (see 9:9 for that) but the horse-drawn, four-wheeled carriages used for transport. The wealthy had ornate carriages, often covered with silver or ivory.

The “bodies and human souls” (epexegetical καί, *kai*, that is, souls) certainly refers to slaves. The addition of “human souls” could be positive, emphasizing that they were not mere cattle but human beings (Bauckham 1993b: 370), or it could be negative, stressing that they were mere “human live stock” (Swete 1911: 235). On the basis of its place in the list (after cattle and sheep), the phrase more likely carries the negative connotation, for the Romans imported incredible numbers of slaves (estimated at 10 million, or close to 20 percent of the population of the Roman Empire),

and the rich based their status somewhat on how many slaves they owned. Slaves were obtained through war, debt, parents selling their children for money, kidnapping, as punishment for criminals, or unwanted children exposed to the elements and left to die (common in the ancient world). While in the first century B.C., war produced the greatest number of slaves, during the Pax Romana, the others were the primary sources. Asia Minor was a primary source of wheat and slaves for Rome, heightening the sense that the list emphasized items that reflected not only the Romans' lust for consumer goods but also their consequent exploitation and plundering of the other nations in the empire.

In 18:14 we hear the voice of the merchants summarizing the list and mourning the passing of all these luxuries. Yet in the Greek there is no introductory "they say," so some (R. Charles, Lohmeyer, Aune) think it an interpolation (Charles and Lohmeyer place this with 18:21–23). While it is unusual for there to be no introductory formula, this is probably because the list of cargo (vv. 12–13) is a parenthesis, and verse 14 continues the idea from verse 11 of the merchants "weeping and mourning" over the loss of cargo and then lamenting it directly. It is presented as a poetic lament with three lines, and the absence of the formula heightens the rhetorical force of the lament.

First, they mourn the disappearance of ἡ ὀπώρα σου τῆς ἐπιθυμίας τῆς ψυχῆς (*hē opōra sou tēs epithymias tēs psychēs*, lit., "your fruit, the desire of your soul"). The "fruit" is obviously the list of luxuries (ὀπώρα as a metaphor for the "good things" life has to offer; so Louw and Nida 1988: 1:33) and staples in 18:12–13, the conspicuous consumption for which Rome was notorious. In apposition is "the desire of your soul," undoubtedly meaning "the fruit you lusted after." It has all "gone away." Second, in a poetic alliteration, πάντα τὰ λιπαρὰ καὶ τὰ λαμπρά (*panta ta lipara kai ta lampra*, all the expensive and beautiful things) have "disappeared"^[16] ἀπὸ σοῦ (*apo sou*, from you; repeated in both lines for emphasis). The first noun stresses the cost of the extravagant luxuries, the second the "bright, glittering" appeal of them to the senses. The result is that these luxuries "will no longer be found," combining the emphatic future negative οὐ μὲν (*ou mē*, never) with the negative particle οὐκέτι (*ouketi*, no longer) to mean "will never be found any longer." They are gone forever, a warning to those in our society who have given themselves over to the folly of conspicuous consumption (which describes most of us). As Jesus said in Matt. 6:19–20, seek "treasures in heaven" rather than "treasures on earth."

In 18:15 we now return to the merchants of 18:11, and they are described as having "become wealthy from her," certainly true in light of the vast numbers of wealthy merchants, some of the richest people in the whole empire. But this also means that they share the guilt of Rome, for they have not only been a major cause of the ostentation but have also participated in it themselves. The rest of the verse repeats the litany of the kings in 18:9–10. They "stand far off" to distance themselves from the fate of the unholy Roman empire. Then they "are afraid of being tormented with her"; here again I take τοῦ βασανισμοῦ αὐτῆς (*tou basanismou autēs*) as an objective genitive and a genitive of accompaniment, respectively. There is no actual sympathy but a self-centered sorrow at all they have lost and a terror of suffering the same fate (which they will).

Their "mourning" in 18:16 (see 18:11) is now expressed in a similar lament to that uttered by the kings. The opening cry, "Woe, woe, great city," found in 18:10, 16, 19, expresses the horror of those who see the destruction occur. The "great city" has become a wasteland (see 18:2, 22–23). The description of Babylon/Rome/the empire of the beast in the rest of the verse adds "fine linen" to a nearly verbatim copy of the description of the great prostitute in 17:4, "clothed in purple and scarlet, and glittering with gold, precious stones, and pearls." The kings mourn the loss of her

power (18:10), the merchants the loss of her wealth. Beale (1999: 912) believes this also reflects the LXX description of the high priest's garments and part of the sanctuary as adorned with "gold, silver, bronze, blue, purple, scarlet, and . . . (precious) stones" (Exod. 25:3–7; 26:1, 31; 28:5–9, 15–20; 35:6; 36:8–12). The major problem with this is that in Exodus these items are part of a much longer list, and so it is difficult to prove John had this in mind. If this were intended, however, it would stress the attempt of Babylon the Great to take on a religious dimension as well. More viable is Beale's use of Ezek. 16, where God adorned Israel with "gold and silver, . . . fine linen" and fed her with "fine flour, honey, and olive oil" (16:13), only to have her play the harlot (16:15). Thus God declares "Woe, woe to you" (16:23). This is closer to the context here. Primarily, though, as Bauckham (1993b: 369) notes, the items reflect the list of cargo in 18:12–13 (note the addition to 17:4, "fine linen"; all the other items here are also on that list). Thus Rome in its lust for luxuries is like "the extravagant lifestyle which a rich courtesan maintains at the expense of her clients."

Finally (18:17a), the merchants decry the sudden ("in one hour") desolation of the "great wealth," using the same term (ἡρημώθη, *ērēmōthē*, make desolate) as used in 17:16. In the same way that a city is left in ruins, so the wealth of Babylon is stripped away, leaving it all a wasteland (the verb is the cognate of ἔρημος, *erēmos*, desert). In James 5:2–5 the wealthy oppressors are warned, "Your wealth has rotted. . . . Your gold and silver are corroded. Their corrosion will testify against you and eat your flesh like fire. You have hoarded wealth in the last days. . . . You have lived on earth in luxury and self-indulgence. You have fattened yourselves in the day of slaughter." This could have described Babylon the Great as well.

iii. Lament of Sea Captains and Sailors (18:17b–19)

The third group that "stands far off" is all those who have profited from Rome's sea trade. The list builds on Ezek. 27:29 ("all who handle the oars . . . the mariners and all the seamen") but with a different list of personnel. The list is the most extensive of the three in this chapter, with four groups: (1) the sea captain, the person who commands or pilots the ship rather than its "owner" (the ναύκληρος, *nauklēros*; see Acts 27:11, where both terms are used; the owners are intended in Rev. 18:19 ["became rich through her wealth"]); (2) "everyone who sails to a place,"^[17] the passengers (most) or merchants (Conzelmann 1975: 290; Louw and Nida 1988: 1:548); (3) the sailors; and (4) those who "make their living from the sea," either fishermen (Aune, Mounce, Thomas) or merchants (Beckwith, R. Charles). I would prefer merchants for the second^[18] and fishermen for the fourth, because the list seems to reflect those who profit from the sea trade, so the idea of "passengers" does not fit as well. C. Smith (1990c: 30–31) calls these wealthy merchants, who sent out huge ships and also enjoyed favorable tax status from Rome. They were the lords of the sea and forced out small competitors to make profit (sound familiar?). Thus, small shipowners are not part of the list because they were oppressed and often bankrupt.

Like the kings (18:9), they "see the smoke of her burning" in 18:18, but this group exclaims, Τίς ὅμοία τῇ πόλει τῇ μεγάλῃ; (*Tis homoia tē polei tē megalē*? Who is like this great city?). This parallels 13:4, "Who is like the beast?" and has the same obvious answer, "No one." Behind this is Ezek. 27:32b, "Who is like Tyre, surrounded by the sea?" All who center on earthly wealth without consideration of God are doomed to destruction, like Babylon, Tyre, Rome, and the final evil empire of the beast. Bauckham (1993b: 374) illustrates the mariner's gratitude for Rome with this story from Suetonius: Augustus was sailing into Puteoli just as a ship from Alexandria was arriving; the passengers and crew of the other ship wore festal clothes and burned incense, saying that it was through him that they lived, sailed the sea, and made fortunes. Thus, the seamen were similar to

the merchants in that Rome expanded their trade and allowed them to become wealthy (see 18:19). Their lament is a mourning for themselves, for they had lost their livelihood.

This group demonstrated their sorrow even more visibly in 18:19, throwing “dust on their heads” as a sign of mourning (Josh. 7:6; 1 Sam. 4:12; 2 Sam. 13:19; 15:32; Job 2:12), echoing Ezek. 27:30, where the seamen also “sprinkle dust on their heads” at the destruction of Tyre. Their lament begins similarly to those in 18:10, 16, “Woe, woe, great city,” but then focuses explicitly on the fact that “all those who had ships on the sea became rich because of [causal ἔκ, *ek*] her wealth,” a reference now to the ship owners (see 18:17b) who profited from the “rich” sea trade Rome made possible. They have participated in the economic sins of Babylon and so share her fate. The cry regarding the suddenness of her destruction (“in one hour you have been made desolate”) follows closely the wording of 18:17b. All the glory, the magnificence, and the extravagance are gone forever, and the seamen realize their future has gone with it. As Michaels (1997: 207) says, “They do not know it yet, but before long the sea itself will be gone” (cf. 21:1).

d. Call for the Heavens and Saints to Rejoice (18:20)

At first glance, this verse seems out of place in a section focusing on the effects of the destruction of Babylon on her followers, but the jarring effect is intended. While those who participated in the sins of Babylon mourn her passing, those who were faithful to God rejoice that the name of God has triumphed and his people have been vindicated. Thus, both heaven and the believers are enjoined to **Εὐφραίνου** (*Euphrainou*, Rejoice), a strong verb used three times in the book (11:10; 12:12; 18:20), with a deliberate contrast between 11:10 (the joy of the earth-dwellers over the death of the two witnesses) and 12:12 and 18:20 (the joy of the saints over the defeat of the dragon [12:12] and his followers [18:20]). Bultmann (*TDNT* 2:774) says that in 12:12 and 18:20 “There are echoes of the OT demand for jubilation at God’s eschatological acts of judgment, and as in Ps. 95:11 [LXX]; Dt. 32:43; Is. 44:23; 49:13 the heavens are also summoned to **εὐφρανθήναι**.” Again, while a call to rejoice over the destruction of a whole group seems strange and offensive at first glance, we must realize that the overriding concern in the book is to defend the justice of God and vindicate the suffering saints. The rejoicing occurs because divine justice is being served and because the oppressors of God’s people are finally receiving what their evil deeds deserve, as the last line says (“God has judged her for the way she judged you”; see below).

As in 12:12, two groups are called on to rejoice, building on Ps. 96:11; Isa. 49:13; and Jer. 51:48, in which heaven and earth are called on to rejoice in God’s righteous deeds. Jeremiah is especially behind this, for there too the heavens and earth rejoice over the destruction of Babylon. In this passage, the “heaven-dwellers” of 12:12 are specified as **οἱ ἅγιοι καὶ οἱ ἀπόστολοι καὶ οἱ προφῆται** (*hoi hagioi kai hoi apostoloi kai hoi prophētai*, the saints, apostles, and prophets).^[19] The meaning of this threefold designation is disputed. Some ancient manuscripts (C 051 2329 □^A a gig vg^{cl}) have omitted **καὶ οἱ** from before **ἀπόστολοι**, thus turning **ἅγιοι** into an adjective, “holy apostles and prophets” (as in Eph. 3:5). This was almost certainly a sight error, however, so there were three groups, not two. Still, while the “apostles” are certainly the twelve apostles of the early church (cf. 21:14, where the “twelve foundations” of the New Jerusalem are the “twelve apostles of the Lamb”), are the “prophets” OT or NT prophets? Beasley-Murray (1978: 268) says that if the “saints” are all God’s people in heaven and on earth, the “apostles” could be those of the new covenant and “prophets” those of the old covenant. But if that were true, we would expect the order to be reversed, “prophets and apostles.” Moreover, while “prophets” in Rev. 10:7 refers to OT prophets, the closest parallel (11:18) refers to Christian prophets (see discussion there), and in 22:9 they are

called “your [John’s] brothers the prophets,” a clear allusion to Christian prophets. Thus, the three terms here probably refer to believers in general and the two groups of leaders in the church of the first century, the apostles and prophets.

The reason for the rejoicing (ὅτι, *hoti*, because, for) is that ἔκρινεν ὁ θεὸς τὸ κρίμα ὑμῶν ἐξ αὐτῆς (*ekrinen ho theos to krima hymōn ex autēs*, God has judged her for the way she judged you; lit., “God has judged the judgment of you [objective genitive] from her”). This theme of *lex talionis* recurs throughout the Apocalypse (most recently 18:6, “Give back to her as she has given”; cf. also 2:23; 6:9–11; 11:5, 18; 14:8, 10; 16:5–7; 19:2; 20:12–13). It is justice that is being celebrated, not just the punishment itself. Similar to verse 6, this is a legal scene, and the spectators at the trial are rejoicing as the just sentence is handed down and the just penalty imposed on the guilty. Caird (1966: 229–30) understands ἐξ αὐτῆς in terms of two OT laws, the law of bloodshed (those who kill will be killed, Gen. 9:5–6) and the law of malicious witness (the perjurer will suffer the same penalty he has sought for the innocent party, Deut. 19:16–19). Babylon/Rome has condemned the saints in their courtroom, so they in turn have been condemned in God’s courtroom. Since they have murdered the saints, apostles, and prophets (Rev. 6:9; 7:14; 11:7; 13:7, 15; 14:13; 17:6; 18:24; 19:2), God has justly destroyed them. Therefore, the same ones who suffered under her repression and persecution are the ones who rejoice over her destruction (see Krodel 1989: 306; Mounce 1998: 336). As Beale (1999: 916–17) says, “The rejoicing does not arrive out of a selfish spirit of revenge but out of a fulfilled hope that God has defended the honor of his just name by not leaving sin unpunished and by showing his people to have been in the right and the verdict rendered by the ungodly world against his saints to be wrong.”

e. Destruction of Babylon (18:21–24)

This is the third and last time an ἄγγελος ἰσχυρός (*angelos ischyros*, mighty angel) appears in the book. In 5:2 the “might” was seen in the portentous message regarding the one worthy to open the seals, and in 10:1–2 it was seen in the authority the angel wielded over earth and sea. In both cases, the “mighty angel” was the herald who held the great “scroll” detailing the end of the age. Here the sentence depicted in that scroll is carried out, and his “might” is seen as he picks up “a stone like a large millstone.” This millstone is not the small stone used by women “grinding [grain] with a hand mill” (Matt. 24:41) but the “large millstone” of Mark 9:42 (and par.), a stone so large it had to be driven by a donkey. It was used to grind large amounts of grain and weighed several tons.

The angel “cast [this stone] into the sea”—another prophetic, acted parable (see 10:8, 10; 11:1–2), which looks back to Jer. 51:63–64, where Jeremiah is told to “tie a stone to the scroll” and throw it into the Euphrates, saying, “So will Babylon sink to rise no more.” Echoing the Jeremiah passage, this angel says, “In this way Babylon the great city will be cast down with sudden violence.”^[20] Βληθήσεται (*blēthēsetai*, will be cast down) is future tense and controls the next few verses, telling us that the carrying out of the sentence is still future. It will take place in two stages, first the civil war (17:16) and then the final destruction at the return of Christ (19:11–21). Chapters 17–18 in this sense celebrate the judicial verdict, with the sentence imminent. Aune (1998b: 1008) notes the two examples of paronomasia (cf. also 2:2, 22; 3:10; 11:18; 14:8; 18:6; 22:18–19 for other uses of paronomasia), ἔκρινεν/κρίμα in 18:20 and ἔβαλεν/βληθήσεται in 18:21. In both cases, the key terms function to heighten the rhetorical power of the judgment. Babylon will first be “judged” and then “cast down” for slandering God’s name and murdering the saints. The same violence that occurred when the huge boulder was “cast” into the water will occur when God’s wrath “casts down” the empire of the beast. The extent of the destruction is introduced in 18:21b and then

amplified in 18:22–23. The city οὐ μὴ εὕρεθῃ ἔτι (*ou mē heurethē eti*, will never be found again), continuing the future orientation of the action. When a millstone sinks into the oceanic depths, it is never seen again. Thus also Babylon is cast down by God, “never to be found again.”

This last phrase (“never to be found”) becomes the model for the next five lines (18:22–23a), all of which utilize the οὐ μὴ . . . ἔτι format and detail what “will never be again” after God’s wrath falls on Babylon/Rome/the empire of the beast. These five losses expand on the merchants’ lament of 18:14, “All the expensive and beautiful things have disappeared from you. They will no longer be found.” There is an ABABA pattern, with the odd numbers being those delightful sounds of everyday life “never again heard,” while the second and fourth are things “never to be found/never to appear” again. First, the “sound of harpists, musicians (μουσικῶν, *mousikōn*), flutists, and trumpeters will never be heard in you again.” These are the artists who brighten everyday life and make the simple moments joyous. Any city without them would be desolate indeed. This builds on Isaiah’s bleak picture in 24:8 (“The gaiety of the tambourines is stilled, the noise of the revelers has stopped, the joyful harp is silent”; and on Ezekiel’s diatribe in 26:13, “I will put an end to your noisy songs, and the music of your harps will be heard no more.” Music has always been the special provenance of the wealthy class, and so this is an economic judgment as well. As Beale (1999: 919) says, “Babylon’s economic system persecuted Christian communities by ostracizing from the various trade guilds those who did not conform to worship of the guilds’ patron deities.” Thus, Babylon has now lost the very thing they used against the Christians. This leads to the second deprivation: “No craftsman of any trade will ever be found in you again.” Cities in the ancient world were subdivided so that different sections of the town would belong to the various trades (see the introduction to the letter to Thyatira, 2:18–29). The removal of the craftsmen means the abandoning of the city itself. Without them there would be no economy, and here we see the fulfillment of 18:6–7, the “double portion” that God would return upon Babylon for the “glory” and “sensuous luxury” she heaped on herself. She lived for her material pleasures, and so God has now taken them all away.

Not only is there to be no economy, there will not even be food. That primary staple of life in the ancient world, grain, will also disappear forever, for there “the sound of a millstone will never be heard in you again.” It is difficult to know whether this refers to business (the large millstone spoken of in 18:21) or the normal affairs of the home (the “hand mill” used by women in Matt. 24:41). In light of the transition from business in the second line (craftsmen) to the home in the fourth (the lamp), either is possible. In light of the centrality of economics in this chapter, however, the broadest interpretation is better, namely, the production of food for the populace with the “large millstone.” The last three items of this list are probably taken from Jer. 25:10, where in his prophecy of the seventy-year captivity, he presents them in slightly different order: “I will banish from them the sounds of joy and gladness, the voices of bride and bridegroom, the sound of millstones and the light of the lamp.” Again, the judgment theme from Jeremiah comes to the fore.

The fourth deprivation is “the light of a lamp.” While the millstone was heard during the day, the lamp was seen at night. These are not the torches that lit the way for groups traveling at night (there were no street lamps in the ancient world) but rather the small lamps of the home (see Thomas 1995: 346, building on Swete and R. Charles). Thus, these are pictures of everyday life, those elements that define normal existence. They are to be seen no more.

Finally, “the voice of bridegroom and bride” will be “heard no more.” There is no stronger metaphor for “joy and gladness” (Jer. 25:10, where the “voice of the bridegroom and the voice of the bride” is placed first as the primary example of joy; see also Jer. 7:34; 16:9; 33:11) than the

wedding, so the stilling of such sounds of joy has a special poignancy. Also, we have here another contrast between the sinner and the saint. The nations will never again know the joy of a wedding, while the church will become the “bride” of Christ (Rev. 19:7–8; 21:2, 9).

Once more the reasons for such judgment are made known (18:23b–24). In the ancient law court, the crimes were always read as the sentence was carried out. Thus, in addition to the other lists of her crimes in 18:2–3, 7, one final enumeration is given. In summary there are three primary sins: economic tyranny, sorcery, and murder. First, the merchants are described as οἱ μεγιστᾶνες τῆς γῆς (*hoi megistanes tēs gēs*, the great men of the earth). This sums up all the emphases on wealth, luxury, and greed in the chapter. Rome conquered the world as much through its merchants as through its armies. In 18:12–13 I spoke of the extent to which all the items there were gathered for Rome at the expense of all its subject peoples. Rome not only dominated but exploited the rest of the empire for its own benefit (so Aune 1998b: 1010). This line refers back to Isa. 23:8 in the prophecy against Tyre, “whose merchants are princes, whose traders are renowned in the earth.” Even though the word in Isa. 23:8 LXX is ἄρχοντες (*archontes*, rulers), μεγιστᾶνες occurs frequently in the LXX for “princes” (Isa. 34:12; Jer. 24:8; 41:10 [34:10 MT]; 25:18 [49:38 MT]; 27:35 [50:35 MT]). In other words, like Tyre the merchants have exalted themselves as the “rulers of the earth” and left God out of the picture. Beale (1999: 921) calls this self-glorification “economic self-idolatry,” linking it also with Ezekiel’s condemnation of “the prince of Tyre” in Ezek. 28:1–9 for “lifting [his heart] up because of your riches,” which in effect was saying, “I am a god.” This also parallels the diatribe in James 4:13–17, which condemns business people for seeking profit without being cognizant of the sovereignty of God. The purpose of life is to serve God and enjoy his gifts, not to serve one’s self and take everything for one’s own pleasure. Thus, the evil empire must be destroyed.

The second judicial basis for judgment is that “all the nations were deceived” ἐν τῇ ἰαμμακείᾳ σου (*en tē pharmakeia sou*, by your sorcery). “Sorcery” or “magic potions” is listed as one of the vices in 9:21; 21:8; 22:15, but here the term is metaphorical. While magic was a major problem in Israel, Judaism, and the early church (Deut. 18:10; Isa. 47:9, 12; Nah. 3:4; Mal. 3:5; Acts 8:9–13; 13:6–11; 19:13–20; Gal. 5:20; Sib. Or. 5.165–66), this text uses “sorcery” as a figure of speech (though see Aune 1998b: 1010 for a literal interpretation) for the demonic deception of the nations by Babylon. Elsewhere in Revelation, ἐπλανήθησαν (*eplanēthēsan*, they were deceived) speaks of Jezebel’s “teaching” and “seducing” believers into immorality and idolatry (2:20) and the false trinity’s “deceiving” the nations (12:9; 13:14; 19:20; 20:3, 8, 10) into worshiping the beast. Thus, idolatry and immorality are clearly connoted in the concept (in 21:8 and 22:15 it is connected with both vices). This makes sense, because Scripture frequently links idolatry with demonic influence (Deut. 32:16–17; Ps. 106:35–37; 1 Cor. 10:20), and idolatry often included immorality as part of the pagan rites (e.g., sacred, or cultic, prostitution).

Finally, Babylon/Rome/the empire of the beast stands condemned by God because she murdered the saints. This last reason is given special emphasis because the ὅτι is not repeated (as in the first two reasons) and because the tone shifts from the second-person style of 18:22–23 back to the third-person style of 18:1–20. Thus, this becomes not only the third reason but a separate indictment on its own, summarizing the emphasis on Babylon’s martyrdom of the saints (6:9–11; 7:14; 11:7; 13:7, 15; 14:13; 16:6; 17:6; 19:2). Yet there are two groups here. There are “the prophets and saints,” probably an adaptation of the list in 18:20, “saints, apostles, and prophets,” and reversing the order of 16:6, “shed the blood of your saints and prophets.” There is a close connection between 18:20 and 18:24. The “prophets and saints” rejoice (v. 20) because God is

vindicating them against those who shed their “blood” (v. 24). Then there are also “all who have been killed on the earth,” most likely meaning not just the saints but all, believer and unbeliever alike, who have died at the hands of the evil empire. There is a deliberate hyperbole here, for it sounds as if Rome is guilty of the blood of every human being ever killed in the history of humankind. But most likely this reflects a similar hyperbole in Jer. 51:49, “Babylon must fall because of Israel’s slain, just as the slain in all the earth have fallen because of Babylon.” This is similar to Rev. 11:18, where the elders praise God that the time has come “to destroy those who destroy the earth.” What Babylon has done to the rest of the earth will now be done to her.

Summary and Contextualization

Justice is often impossible to find in this fallen world. The Golden Rule has been modified in this world to say, “Do unto others *before* they can do unto you.” It is generally agreed that the recent outbreak of school shootings is not simply the result of bad parenting or violence in movies. More than anything else, it is the result of a society of greed, an attitude that says *I* can do whatever *I* wish and no one has rights but *me*. This narcissistic culture is the heart of the evil empire of Babylon the Great, and it was the core of the Roman Empire on which the imagery here is based. The primary thrust of 18:1–19:5 is divine justice, seen in both the sovereignty of God and the destruction of Babylon; the secondary emphasis is the vindication of the saints for all they have suffered.

In 18:1–19:5 John is shown the results of “the punishment of the great prostitute” promised by the angel in 17:1 and partially fulfilled in 17:16–17. There are two main parts, the results from the standpoint of the world (18:1–24) and those from the standpoint of the people of God (19:1–5). Chapter 18 has three sections, beginning with the announcement of the angel with “great authority,” saying Babylon has fallen and is totally desolate (18:1–3). Such is the final destiny of all who oppose and reject God, both individuals and governments. The three reasons all apply to unbelievers today: (1) one does not have to read many magazines or watch many movies to realize the extent to which sinners today guzzle “the wine of passion for immorality.” One must realize that divine judgment is not too far away. (2) Those who willingly participate in such immorality will also participate in the judgment to come. (3) Those who live for greed and luxury will also face an angry God for seeking only “the treasures of earth” and ignoring “the treasures of heaven” (Matt. 6:19–20). Jesus warned them well (and this includes materialistic Christians): “What sorrows await you who are rich, for you have your only happiness now” (Luke 6:24 NLT).

The second part (18:4–20) is uttered by a heavenly voice that begins by warning believers to flee lest they participate both in the sins and then in the terrible judgment to follow, for Babylon will be repaid “double,” namely, all she deserves for her extravagant living (18:7a) and for her excessive pride (18:7b). This is a valuable warning for Christians today who partake of the fleeting pleasures of this world. Then we see the laments of the three groups who benefited the most from the largesse received from the unholy alliance. All mourn the terrible and sudden demise of the great city but mostly lament their own losses. The vassal kings bemoan the loss of all the sensuality and luxury they had shared. The merchants weep for the incredible luxuries that were lost. Those of us in the United States should read the cargo list carefully, for all the items were exploited by Rome at the expense of the other nations from whom they were taken. The “first world” fits this picture closely, for now the average first-world household contains most of the items mentioned here, and we live in incredible luxury while most of the rest of the

world starves. Finally, the sea merchants and sailors mourn the loss of all the wealth as well. Yet in total contrast (18:20), the celestial beings and the saints are called on to rejoice at the divine justice that was meted out. Here it is important to note that there is no call to enjoy the suffering of the sinners but rather to celebrate the divine justice that was served and the vindication of the suffering saints (cf. 6:9–11).

The third part (18:21–24) is the destruction of Babylon/Rome/the empire of the beast as symbolized in the violent splash as the huge boulder is thrown into the sea. This final destruction is yet to come (note the future orientation of the verbs in 18:21–23a). Once again (as in 18:2, 14) the utter desolation is depicted in the complete absence of all that makes life in this world worthwhile—music, work, food, light, and weddings. Finally, three further reasons for the terrible judgment are given: the arrogance of the merchants, the deception of sorcery, and the slaughter of God’s people and others. Everyone who reads or hears this today must ask the all-important question: Whose side am I on? There will be no neutrality, no possibility of riding the fence. The call is clear—“Choose this day whom you will serve!”

Additional Notes

18:3. **πέπτωκαν:** Two main verbs are represented, each with more than one form in the various manuscripts. The one with the best external attestation is **πίπτω**, with the two perfect third plurals **πέπτωκαν** (A C 69 2031) and **πεπτώκασι** (1611 1006 046⁷ et al.) well supported. The other, **πίνω**, has three forms, each with poorer attestation: **πέπωκαν** (1828 2329), **πέπωκεν** (P 051 1 2053* et al.), and **πεπόκασιν** (1006^c 1859 2020 2138 et al.). Virtually all commentators and versions have accepted **πέπωκαν** as the more likely reading because “fell” does not make sense and because “drink” is more in keeping with the parallels (14:8; 17:2; Jer. 25:15; 51:7, 39) as well as the flow of this section. It is believed that a sight error and the influence of “fallen, fallen” in verse 2 led to the mistake (see Metzger 1994: 683). I agree with Aune (1998b: 965–66), however, that the more difficult reading here, “has fallen,” was probably corrected by later scribes on the basis of 14:8. Moreover, the better manuscript evidence is clearly with “fallen,” and it makes a great deal of sense if one interprets **ἐκ** as causal, “All the nations have fallen *because of* the wine that leads to passion for her immorality.” The reason for choosing **πέπτωκαν** over the other third plural form is the same as for choosing **πέπωκαν** over its other forms: it is the more rare and difficult third plural form.

18:6. Several (Minear, Michaels, Aune) make a strong case for the subject of “pay her back” being Christians rather than “angels of punishment,” taking the understood subject of the imperative to be “my people” from 18:4. This is viable because we have already seen in 2:26–27 and 17:14 that the saints will be part of the “armies of heaven” in 19:14 who accompany Christ in the destruction of the nations. This fits the apocalyptic motif of the “righteous as agents of divine retribution” (Aune) in apocalyptic literature (1 Enoch 38.5; 90.19; 91.12; 95.3, 7; 96.1; 98.12; Jub. 23.30; Apoc. Abr. 29.17–20). While this is certainly possible, it is a stretch to see the saints as the “agents of retribution” in Revelation. In 6:9–11 it is clearly God who will have vengeance on their behalf. This is the theme throughout the rest of the book as well (e.g., 8:2–5; 11:3–6, 18; 12:7–10; 14:8–20; 15:7; 16:5–7; 17:1, 17; 18:8, and esp. 18:20: “God has judged her for the way she treated you”). Of course, the saints could be the instruments of divine justice, and 2:26–27 could point that way (“They will dash them to pieces like pottery”), but for the righteous to take their own vengeance on the earth-dwellers goes beyond the data. Other scholars (Moffatt, Roloff, Wall, Thomas) take the instruments to be the beast and his vassal kings (16:12–16; 17:15–17), since it says God uses them to destroy the great harlot. This makes even better sense in light of the proximity of 17:15–17. But there is no hint in the immediate context that they are being addressed, and this does not make as much sense as the “angels of punishment.” In conclusion, the law-court metaphor of Schüssler Fiorenza (1991: 99), with celestial beings carrying out the punishment, best fits the context.

3. Hallelujah Chorus—Joy at His Just Judgment (19:1–5)

In 18:20 the heavens and the saints are told to rejoice at God’s judgment of Babylon the Great. That call to celebration is now expanded into a series of “hallelujah” choruses sung by the heavenly multitude (19:1–3) and the elders and living creatures (19:4), and finally by an invitation to those “servants” on earth to participate in the joy and praise of God (19:5, on which see the additional note). Only here in the NT does the word Ἀλληλουϊά (*Hallēlouia*, Hallelujah = praise Yahweh) occur, and it governs 19:1–8. Yet this section, while a single whole, functions both to conclude the major section of the destruction of Babylon the Great (19:1–5) and to introduce the section on Jesus’ return (19:6–8). There could be no greater contrast than the mournful laments of the three groups most affected by Babylon’s demise (18:9–19) and the great joy of these who were most hurt by the murderous policies of the evil empire (18:20; 19:1–5). The interconnecting series of hymns reminds one of chapters 4–5 and the great praises to God and the Lamb there (see also 7:10–12; 11:15–18).[1] The geographical movement is the opposite of those chapters. There the direction was outward from the throne in concentric circles, from the elders and living creatures to the heavenly multitude. Here the movement is inward from the multitude (19:1–3) to the elders and living creatures (19:4) to the voice from the throne itself (19:5).

- a. Hymns of praise by the multitude (19:1–3)
 - i. Praise for God’s just judgment (19:1–2)
 - ii. Praise for his eternal punishment (19:3)
- b. Concluding affirmation by elders and living creatures (19:4)
- c. Refrain: the voice from the throne calls saints to praise (19:5)

Exegesis and Exposition

¹After this I heard as it were a loud voice of a great multitude in heaven saying,

“Hallelujah!

Salvation, glory, and power belong to our God,

for his judgments are true and just,

²for he has judged the great prostitute

who corrupted the earth by her immorality,

and he has avenged the blood of his slaves shed by her hand.”

³Then they said a second time,

“Hallelujah!

The smoke of her torment is going to ascend forever and ever.”

⁴Then the twenty-four elders and the four living creatures fell down and worshiped God who sits on the throne, saying,

“Amen, hallelujah!”

⁵Then a voice came from the throne, saying,

“Praise our God,

all you his slaves,

you who fear him,

small and great.”

a. Hymns of Praise by the Multitude (19:1–3)

This is structured similarly to 16:5–7, as the first hymn praises God “for his judgments are true and

just” (19:1–2), and the second adds a refrain celebrating the results of that judgment (19:3). But here there are not two different participants (as in 16:5–7), and the second does not repeat the language of the first (as in 16:7). Yet it does resemble that great statement of theodicy in chapter 16.

i. Praise for God’s Just Judgment (19:1–2)

“After this” (namely the destruction of Babylon in chaps. 17–18), John has another auditory vision and “hears” a “loud voice,” namely, the praise of the heavenly multitude. The only other occurrence of the ὄχλου πολλοῦ (*ochlou pollou*, great multitude) is in 7:9, where the group stands before the throne and praises God for his salvation. The debate is whether these are celestial beings (Wall, Aune) or the triumphant saints in heaven (Krodel; Roloff; Bauckham 1993b: 331; Mounce). If these are the same group as in 7:9, they must be the saints; and that seems more likely, for as Mounce (1998: 341) says, there are special parallels in the celebration of God’s “salvation” (7:10; 12:10) and of his “avenging the blood” of the martyrs (6:10) with believers elsewhere in the book.

Ἀλληλουϊά is taken partly from the Hallel psalms of Ps. 113–18 (especially related to Passover with the frequent allusions to the exodus; see Johnson 1981: 570) and from its use as the title for several psalms (106, 111, 112, 113, 117, 135, 146, 147, 148, 149, 150). It also had a special place in the cultic life of Israel, expressing jubilant joy, and like “Hosanna” in Mark 11:9–10 and parallels, it had become a cry of joy in the Lord in the Jewish world. As Wu (*DLNT* 662) has said, it “is placed at the last song of praise [in the book], shared by both celestial and human beings in exuberant response to God’s sovereign judgment upon the evil (Rev 19:1, 3, 4) and his final victory (Rev 19:6).” This joy is expressed regarding ἡ σωτηρία καὶ ἡ δόξα καὶ ἡ δύναμις (*hē sōtēria kai hē doxa kai hē dynamis*, salvation, glory, and power) that τοῦ θεοῦ ἡμῶν (*tou theou hēmōn*, belong to our God; genitive of possession). As in 7:10 and 12:10, σωτηρία refers to the “victory” of God that has delivered his people (see those verses). All three terms occur in 7:10 (salvation) and 12 (glory and power), further cementing the connection to that great scene. Two (salvation and power) occur also in 12:10, where the heavenly voice celebrates God’s triumph over the dragon. All three passages show that God’s great “victory” was accomplished through his omnipotent “power” and resulted in his “glory.” It is the privilege of the saints not only to celebrate these great truths but also to participate in them (2:26–27; 17:14; 19:14).

The reason (ὅτι, *hoti*, because, for) for this celebration is a virtual quotation of 16:7, “His judgments are true and just” (the order is reversed in 15:3, “Just and true are your ways”). God’s justice is “true” because it is based on his own covenant faithfulness and “just” because it is based on his holy character. In other words, his judgments are both morally true and legally just (see on 15:3; 16:7). Babylon is being destroyed because her evil deeds demand such an extreme punishment. This is expressed further in the second ὅτι clause, stating the basis of the “judgment” of “the great prostitute.” This fulfills the promise to John by the angel in 17:1, “Come, I will show you the judgment of the great prostitute.” That judgment was carried out in 17:16; 18:2, 8, 9–19, 20, 21, and here it is celebrated.

The legal basis of the judgment is that she εἰθίρειν τὴν γῆν ἐν τῇ πορνείᾳ αὐτῆς (*ephtheiren tēn gēn en tē porneia autēs*, corrupted the earth by her immorality). Φθείρω occurs only here in the Apocalypse, but the cognate διαφθείρειν (*diaphtheirein*, to destroy) occurs in 11:18, and Beale (1999: 927) believes there is double meaning here: Babylon has not only “corrupted” the earth but “destroyed” it, as seen in the persecution mentioned in the next line. The corrupting presence of the evil empire is stressed in 14:8 (“made all the nations drink of the wine that leads to passion for

her immorality”); 17:2 (“The inhabitants of the earth were drunk with the wine of adultery with her”; cf. 17:4); 18:3 (“All the nations have fallen because of the wine that leads to passion for immorality”); and 18:9 (“the kings of the earth who committed adultery and lived in sensuous luxury with her”). In each of these, we see how the great prostitute has seduced the nations by utilizing Satan’s great weapon, “deception” (12:9; 20:3, 8, 10). Now she must pay the price for her evil folly.

The final reason is God’s response to the imprecatory prayers of the saints for “vengeance” (ἐκδικεῖς *ekdikēis*) in 6:10. I have already pointed out how the seals, trumpets, and bowls were God’s answers to those prayers (8:3–5). Now we see that the destruction of the great prostitute is another answer to those prayers, as God ἐξεδίκησεν τὸ αἷμα τῶν δούλων αὐτοῦ ἐκ χειρὸς αὐτῆς (*exedikēsen to haima tōn doulōn autou ek cheiros autēs*, has avenged the blood of his slaves [see 11:18 on this term] shed by her hand).[2] Since God’s slaves were martyred “by the hand of” persecution, the perpetrators will shed their own blood in return. The OT states that God “will avenge the blood of his servants” (Deut. 32:43; 2 Kings 9:7; cf. Ps. 79:10; 94:1), and this is an extension of that covenant promise.

ii. Praise for His Eternal Punishment (19:3)

The refrain by the multitude, introduced by the second “hallelujah,” celebrates the extent of that punishment. The language reflects 14:11, “The smoke of their torment is going to ascend forever and ever” (cf. Isa. 34:9–10 behind both these verses). Also, the destruction of Babylon in Rev. 18:9, 18 centered on “the smoke of her burning,” a natural picture of devastation caused by war (probably the final war of 19:14–21). But this is not so much the smoke of war as eternal “smoke of torment” that accompanies the lake of fire (19:20; 20:10, 14–15). This smoke “of torment” is in direct contrast to the “smoke of incense,” the prayers of the saints (8:4), and the “smoke from the glory of God” that filled the temple (15:8). Also, the “eternal torment” of the unbelievers is in direct contrast to the God “who lives forever and ever” (1:18; 4:9, 10; 10:6; 15:7) and “reigns forever and ever” (11:15) and especially to the eternal reward awaiting the righteous (22:5).

b. Concluding Affirmation by Elders and Living Creatures (19:4)

As stated earlier, the elders and living creatures are the celestial worship leaders in the book (4:8–10; 5:8, 11, 14; 7:11, 13–17; 11:16; 14:3; 19:4). As in 4:10; 5:14; 7:11; 11:16, they once again “fall down and worship” God. Both terms speak of worship and are virtual synonyms (prostrating oneself rather than praying with “raised hands” [Ps. 24:4; Luke 24:50; 1 Tim. 2:8] was the more serious form of worship, symbolizing total surrender). As in 4:9–10 and 5:13, the worship is addressed to “God who sits on the throne,” namely the sovereign God, Lord of all. The entire scene reminds one of the incredible worship of chapters 4 and 5 and the theme of the majesty of God there.

They do not utter another hymn but instead give a solemn affirmation of the hymns sung by the great multitude. The combination “Amen, hallelujah” occurs nowhere else in the NT but is found in Ps. 106:48, where it functions as a doxology for the fourth book of the Psalms, “Praise be to the LORD, the God of Israel, from everlasting to everlasting. Let all the people say, ‘Amen, hallelujah!’” Also, this follows a prayer for deliverance from the nations (Ps. 106:47), a fitting context for this, as it celebrates the reality of that deliverance. Elsewhere in Revelation, ἀμήν concludes the doxology of 1:6, affirms the prophecy of 1:7, concludes the series of praise songs in 5:9–14, frames the praise song of 7:12, and concludes the book (22:20, 21). Throughout, it maintains its OT meaning of “so be

it,” authenticating and guaranteeing the efficacy of the worship (see on 1:6). Thus, the “amen” in some sense confirms the worship of the previous hymns, and the “hallelujah” continues the praise established in 19:1, 3 and leads into the call to praise (v. 5). In light of all that God has accomplished for his people, the whole of the celestial kingdom can only say, “Praise Yahweh!”

c. Refrain: The Voice from the Throne Calls Saints to Praise (19:5)

This is the third group worshiping in chapter 19: first the heavenly multitude, then the elders and living creatures, and now the saints on earth. Thus, the scene shifts from heaven (19:1–4) to earth (19:5). The meaning of *φωνὴ ἀπὸ τοῦ θρόνου* (*phōnē apo tou thronou*, a voice from the throne) is debated. There is “a voice from heaven” in 10:8; 11:12; 12:10; 14:2, 13 and “a voice from the temple” in 16:1. Only here in 16:17 and in 21:3 (using *ἐκ* rather than *ἀπό*) is there “a voice from the throne.” The other “voice(s)” have been assumed to be God’s for the most part, but that is difficult because the voice commands, “Praise our God.” While some have interpreted the voice to be Christ (Chilton 1987: 472; Beale 1999: 930), one would expect it to be “my God” if it was Christ (Beasley-Murray 1978: 273; Thomas 1995: 361). It could be one of the elders or living creatures (who are nearest the throne in chap. 4), but those are always named in the book. It is best to say with Aune (1998b: 1027) that the phrase “indicates the divine authorization of the speaker” and leave it at that.

As several point out (R. Charles, Lohmeyer, Aune), the opening statement, *Αἰνεῖτε τῷ θεῷ ἡμῶν* (*Aineite tō theō hēmōn*, Praise our God), may well reflect the Hebrew “praise Yahweh” (used as such in the LXX at Ps. 112:1 [113:1 MT]; 116:1 [117:1 MT]; 134:1 [135:1 MT]; 146:1 [147:1 MT]; 148:1; 150:1) and is probably a translation here of “hallelujah.” *Αἰνέω* is a strong liturgical term denoting “the joyful praise of God expressed in doxology, hymn or prayer” (Schlier, *TDNT* 1:177). Those called to praise are once again called “his slaves” (1:1; 2:20; 7:3; 11:18; 19:2; 22:3, 6), referring to God’s ownership over his people. Then they are also called “you who fear him,”^[3] as in 11:18. It is clear that “fearing God” is a major element of the command to holiness and perseverance in the Apocalypse. It means much more than reverence; it refers to that healthy “fear” of the God who is judge and rewards everyone, saint and sinner, “according to their works” (see 2:23; 14:13; 18:6; 20:12–13; 22:12). Finally, they are described as “small and great,” meaning those with no worldly status and those with great prominence in society (see also 11:18 and 20:12, where it refers to believers; and 13:16 and 19:18, where it refers to unbelievers). The language reflects Ps. 115:13, which says God “will bless those who fear the LORD—small and great alike.” This psalm contrasts those who “trust in the LORD” (115:9–10) with those whose “idols are silver and gold” (115:4), a fitting contrast for the Apocalypse as well.

Summary and Contextualization

The reaction of those in heaven and the saints on earth fulfills the command of 18:20 as they all rejoice and sing a series of “hallelujah” choruses. First, the heavenly multitude celebrates (19:1–2) the victory, power, and justice of the God who has both judged the evil empire and avenged the blood of the saints in response to their prayer in 6:10. They also praise God (19:3) because the eternal punishment of Babylon is in keeping with her “crimes” (18:5) and exploitative luxuries (18:7, 12–13). Next, the elders and living creatures worship God and affirm the hymnic celebration of the multitudes (19:4). Finally, a voice from the throne calls on the saints on earth to join in praising God (19:5). This is a message for us as well, for this asks the saints to pray in hope that this vindication will truly come to pass. We are still in the midst of the fray,

experiencing more the suffering than the triumph. But we believe that the final triumph is guaranteed, that Almighty God will indeed bring it to pass. That is the true message of this book.

Additional Note

19:5. This call to praise God can be taken with 19:1–4 (Beckwith, Mounce) or with 19:6–8 (Caird, Sweet, Giesen, Aune). In itself it functions as a transition between the two parts of the hallelujah section. But the call to praise in 19:5 is more likely connected to the righteous judgment of God in 19:2–3 than to the wedding of the Lamb in 19:6–8, as seen in the praise songs of 11:17–18; 12:10–11; 15:3–4; 16:5–7 (where praise of God is linked to his righteous judgment). Moreover, both sections begin with the “voice of a great multitude” (19:1, 6), so it forms a more natural break to place 19:5 with 19:1–4. Thus, both sections begin with the “great multitude” singing. On the other hand, some (Bauckham, Michaels) believe that the whole of 19:1–8 concludes chapters 17–18. However, the clear connection between 19:6–8 and 21:2, 9 (the bride of the Lamb) makes it more likely that 19:6–8 introduces a new section.

- IV. Final Judgment at the Arrival of the Eschaton (17:1–20:15)
 - A. Destruction of Babylon the Great (17:1–19:5)
 - B. Final Victory: The End of the Evil Empire at the Parousia (19:6–21)
 - C. The Thousand-Year Reign of Christ and Final Destruction of Satan (20:1–10)
 - D. Great White Throne Judgment (20:11–15)

B. Final Victory: The End of the Evil Empire at the Parousia (19:6–21)

The first stage of the destruction of Babylon the Great occurred in 17:1–19:5. There the preliminary judgment of the “great prostitute” (17:1; 19:2) took place via a God-directed civil war (17:16–17), as the beast and vassal kings turned on her. The final violent destruction of Babylon the Great (18:21 with its future orientation) was to be concluded in another event, the return of Christ in judgment. In the NT there are two aspects of his return, the rapture of the saints (Mark 13:24–27 par.; 1 Cor. 15:51–57; 2 Cor. 5:1–8; 1 Thess. 4:15–18) and the judgment of the sinners (Matt. 13:24–30; 25:31–46; 1 Thess. 5:1–11; 2 Thess. 2:1–10; 2 Pet. 3:10–13). In Revelation the latter is all-important, and the only place that might symbolize the rapture is the ascension of the two witnesses in 11:11–12. Here it seems as if the saints have already been caught up, for when Christ comes (19:14), “The armies in heaven [the saints on the basis of 17:14] were following.”[1] But as elsewhere in the book, such chronological questions cannot be answered. Whether Revelation favors a rapture before, in the middle of, or after the “great tribulation” must be answered on the basis of the rest of the NT (Matt. 24:22, 29–31; 1 Thess. 4:13–5:11; 2 Thess. 2:1–12) as well as on the basis of the Apocalypse itself (3:10; 11:11–12; 19:11–21).

In this passage, both perspectives are present. For the saints, the return of Christ prepares for “the wedding of the Lamb” in 19:6–8 when they will be rewarded for their “righteous deeds” (19:8b). For the sinners, there is final destruction, occurring in three stages. First, Christ arrives on the white warhorse with the armies of heaven, carrying a sharp sword to destroy the nations (19:11–16). Second, the carrion birds are invited to “the great banquet of God” (note the contrast with the “wedding of the Lamb” in 19:7) to feast on those about to die (19:17–18). Finally, the battle occurs and the armies of the beast are slaughtered (19:19–21). Throughout the book, God is called “Lord God Almighty” (see on 1:8; 19:6). Here Christ is the mighty conqueror, and it is he who rules “with the rod of iron” (19:15).

Christ is uppermost throughout this passage, and it is one of the most powerful portrayals of him ever written. As in 5:5–6, it begins with him as the Lamb who is the conquering ram, but at the same time the conqueror is the bridegroom (19:6–8). As conqueror he rides a white horse, and as the just conqueror he is also faithful (19:11). His name in one sense is unknown (19:12), in another sense it is “the Word of God,” and in still another sense it is written on his thigh (19:16). He destroys with the sword of judgment (19:15a), wields the shepherd’s club (19:15b), and at the same time treads God’s winepress of wrath (19:15c). The imagery boils at high heat, and the reader can barely keep up with it. Most of all, the great war for which the book has prepared since 16:14, 16 never really occurs. The armies of the beast gather to fight (19:19), but no battle takes place. The sword comes out of his mouth (19:15a), and immediately the armies are no more (19:20–21). The beast and false prophet are the first of three groups cast into the lake of fire

(19:20; cf. 20:10, 14), and the armies are killed (19:21) and await the final judgment (20:11–14).

1. Hallelujah chorus—praise for God’s reign and the Lamb’s wedding (19:6–10)
 - a. Hymn of praise (19:6–8)
 - b. Command to write (19:9–10)
2. The conquering Christ arrives with armies of heaven (19:11–16)
 - a. Description of the rider on the white horse (19:11–13)
 - b. Actions of the rider on the white horse (19:14–16)
3. Invitation to carrion birds for another messianic banquet (19:17–18)
4. Swift battle and its aftermath (19:19–21)

Exegesis and Exposition

⁶Then I heard as it were the voice of a great multitude, and it was like the voice of many waters and like the voice of loud thunders, saying,

“Hallelujah!

For our Lord God Almighty has begun to reign.

⁷Let us rejoice and be glad.

Let us give him glory,

for the wedding of the Lamb has come,

and his wife has prepared herself.

⁸God has given her clothes to wear,

fine linen, bright and pure.

(The fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints.)

⁹And he said to me, “Write: Blessed are those invited to the wedding supper of the Lamb.” Then he said to me, “These are the true words of God.” ¹⁰Then I fell at his feet to worship him. But he said to me, “Watch out! Don’t do this! I am a fellow slave with you and your brothers and sisters, namely, those who maintain their testimony for Jesus. Worship God. For testimony about Jesus is Spirit-inspired prophecy.”

¹¹I saw heaven standing opened, and behold a white horse, and the one riding it is called “Faithful and True.” In righteousness he judges and makes war. ¹²His eyes are [like] a raging fire, and there are many diadems on his head. He has a name written on him that no one knows except he himself. ¹³He is clothed with a garment dipped in blood, and his name is called “the Word of God.” ¹⁴The armies in heaven were following him on white horses, dressed in fine linen, white and pure. ¹⁵From his mouth proceeds a sharp sword so that he can strike down the nations. He will shepherd them with a rod of iron, and he is going to trample the winepress, namely the furious wrath of God Almighty. ¹⁶On his garment at his thigh this name is written: “King of kings and Lord of lords.”

¹⁷Then I saw one angel standing in the sun and crying out in a loud voice, saying to the birds flying in midair, “Come, gather together for the great banquet of God, ¹⁸so that you might eat the flesh of kings and the flesh of generals and the flesh of mighty men and the flesh of horses and their riders and the flesh of free and slave and of the small and the great.”

¹⁹Then I saw the beast and the kings of the earth and their armies gathered together to make war against the rider on the horse and against his army. ²⁰The beast was seized as well as the false prophet with him who had done the miraculous signs on his behalf, by which he had deceived those who had the mark of the beast and who had worshiped his image. They both were thrown alive into the lake of fire that burns with sulfur. ²¹The rest were killed with the sword that came out of the mouth of the rider on the horse, and all the birds gorged themselves on their flesh.

1. Hallelujah Chorus—Praise for God’s Reign and the Lamb’s Wedding (19:6–10)

This is the second half of the united set of “hallelujah” hymns in 19:1–10, but since the first half concludes the judgment oracles of 17:1–19:5, that has been placed with the previous section. This half begins the section on the return of Christ, and it starts on a joyous note. For the saints, it is the greatest celebration of them all, for they will become the “bride of the Lamb,” and all of heaven is their dowry (21:9–10).

a. Hymn of Praise (19:6–8)

Aune (1998b: 1022–23) says this is the only hymn in the book that “conforms fully to the OT genre,” having three parts: a summons to praise Yahweh (“hallelujah”), a thematic sentence stating the reason for the praise (“our Lord reigns”), and the divine actions that motivate one to praise (19:7–8). As the “great multitude” began the first half of the hallelujah choruses (19:1–5), so it begins the second half as well. The Greek (ὡς ἰωνὴν ὄχλου πολλοῦ, *hōs phōnēn ochlou pollou*, as it were the voice of a great multitude) is virtually identical, but the “loud voice” of 19:1 is here expanded to “the voice of many waters and like the voice of loud thunders.” In 1:15 the voice of “the one like a son of man” was “like the sound of many waters,” and in 14:2–3 the harpists singing the “new song” were as loud as “many waters and loud thunder” (19:6 is a near duplicate of 14:2; see also Isa. 17:12; Ezek. 1:24; 43:2; Dan. 10:6). The “new song” of Rev. 14:2 is closely connected to the hymn here, for it could only be sung by the faithful, victorious believers, and this song celebrates their marriage to the Lamb. Its incredible volume is in keeping with the stupendous message it provides. Wedding songs are known for their exuberance.^[2]

This is the final “hallelujah” of the series, and it provides an especially apt praise theme. Once more the supreme title of the book, “Lord God Almighty,” appears (cf. 1:8; 4:8; 11:17; 15:3; 16:7, 14; 19:15; 21:22), and as before it centers on his omnipotence and sovereignty. Here almighty God ἐβασίλευσεν (*ebasileusen*, has begun to reign—an ingressive aorist that reproduces the one in 11:17). At the seventh trumpet, the hymn of the elders (11:15–18) celebrates this same event, when God takes his “great power” and “begins to reign” (see 11:17 for OT background).

On this basis the multitude calls all of God’s people, heavenly and earthly, to “rejoice and be glad” (19:7). This call also occurs in Matt. 5:12, which tells the persecuted saints, “Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven.” Both Matthew and this passage go back to several OT passages calling the people of God to “rejoice and be glad” (Ps. 31:7; 32:11; 70:4; 118:24), but especially relevant here is 1 Chron. 16:31, which says, “Let the heavens rejoice, let the earth be glad; let them say among the nations, ‘The LORD reigns!’” In light of the reign of God, his people must not only rejoice but “give him glory.” The command to glorify God was an important part of the call to salvation in 14:7 and 15:4 (cf. 11:13; 16:9), and here it is the natural result of experiencing the reign of God and especially of being part of “the bride” of Christ.

The reason for this joy is not only that his eternal reign has begun but also that ἦλθεν ὁ γάμος τοῦ ἀρνίου (*ēlthen ho gamos tou arniou*, the wedding of the Lamb has come; ἦλθεν is a culminative aorist emphasizing the arrival of the great event). There is a definite contrast between the “great prostitute” and “the bride” of Christ (see 21:2, 9). This imagery of Israel as the bride of Yahweh and the church as the bride of Christ has a rich background in both OT and NT. It occurs primarily in the Prophets, as Isa. 54:5 says, “For your Maker is your husband—the LORD Almighty is his name” (cf. 49:18; 61:10; 62:5; Jer. 31:32). Fekkes (1990: 269–70) argues that Isa. 61:10 is especially close to this passage (“He has clothed me with garments of salvation and arrayed me in a robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom adorns his head like a priest, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels”). Ezekiel 16:7–14 describes beautifully the process by which God has prepared Israel as his bride and “spread the corner of my garment over you” (16:8, a symbol for entering into a marriage covenant). The wedding jewelry and clothes of Ezek. 16:10–13 are partially behind the wedding garments of Rev. 19:7–8. Finally, in Hos. 2:16–20 God says that in the day when Israel returns “you will call me ‘my husband,’” and “I will betroth you to me forever.” In the NT there are parables centering on a wedding (Matt. 22:1–14 par.; 25:1–13), and Jesus speaks of himself as the bridegroom

(Mark 2:19–20 par.), as does John the Baptist (John 3:29). Paul speaks of presenting the believers “to one husband, to Christ,” as “a pure virgin” (2 Cor. 11:2), and in Eph. 5:25–27 he uses wedding imagery to describe Christ presenting “her to himself as a radiant church” (= a radiant bride; cf. 5:32).

In all of these passages, the betrothal and the wedding are juxtaposed, but this is based on the meaning of betrothal in the ancient world. The marriage contract was developed and signed before the betrothal, and in the period between that and the actual wedding, the two were considered husband and wife (see “his wife,” ἡ γυναῖκὴ αὐτοῦ, *hē gynē autou*, in Rev. 19:7b). This is why Joseph, when he found out Mary was pregnant, was going to “divorce her quietly” in Matt. 1:19. They were officially husband and wife, so a divorce was needed even though the wedding had not yet taken place. Therefore, both betrothal and the wedding are combined throughout the scriptural portrayal of the people of God as his bride. McIlraith (1999: 524–25) notes three stages in the Apocalypse: the prepared wife/betrothal (19:7), the bride (21:2–8), and the wife (21:9–22:5). Miller (1998: 302) sees the wedding imagery continuing in the rest of the chapter, the union of the bride with the Lamb here followed by union in battle in 19:11 and union in peace in 21:9. Both of these ideas are interesting but go beyond the evidence. The only two passages that utilize wedding imagery are 19:7–8 and 21:2, 9. It is difficult to find any progression of wedding image behind the two.

Since the wedding day has arrived, ἡ γυναῖκὴ αὐτοῦ ἡτοίμασεν ἑαυτήν (*hē gynē autou hētoimasen heautēn*, his wife has prepared herself). This preparation builds on the imagery of Ezek. 16:8–14 but especially refers to the “readiness” for the Lord’s return via faithfulness and perseverance that is so much a part of this book. Ἐτοιμάζω is often used of the divine “preparation” of events during this period (Rev. 8:6; 9:15; 12:6; 16:12), and in 21:2 God has “prepared” the New Jerusalem “as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband.” Here alone in the book are the saints described as “preparing themselves.” They do so by remaining “faithful” (2:10, 13; 13:10; 14:12; 17:14), maintaining their “testimony for Jesus” (1:9; 6:9; 12:11, 17; 20:4), enduring hardship (1:9; 2:2–3, 19; 3:10; 13:10; 14:12), and obeying God’s commands (12:17; 14:12).

In another magnificent show of sovereignty (19:8), the bride ἐδόθη (*edothē*, was given) by God clothes ἵνα περιβάλῃται (*hina peribalētai*, to wear; ἵνα is used [as often in the book] for the infinitive). Ἐδόθη is used throughout Revelation to describe God’s control of the four horsemen (6:2, 4, 8), of the actions of the beast (13:5, 7, 14, 15), and of many other events (6:11; 7:2; 8:3; 9:1, 3, 5; 11:1–3; 16:8; 20:4). God sovereignly guides the actions of the righteous and the unrighteous alike. In this passage he is taking control of the marriage of the church to the Lamb. Yet there seems to be a contradiction between God’s control and the actions of the people of God (“preparing herself” by “righteous deeds”). Yet there is no true contradiction, for these are the works of James (“Faith without deeds is dead,” 2:26) rather than the works of Paul (“By grace you have been saved . . . not by works,” Eph. 2:8–9). These deeds follow salvation as the necessary proof that regeneration has occurred. Here we have the two sides of the Christian life described in Phil. 2:12–13. The believers “work out their own salvation” (= “prepared herself”) as God “works in them” (= God “has given her clothes to wear”). Thus, this describes those who have already believed (see Johnson, Mounce, Beale).

The clothes she is given by God are βύσσινον λαμπρὸν καθαρὸν (*byssinon lampron katharon*, fine linen, bright and pure). This is the luxurious linen of 18:12 and establishes a further contrast both with the great prostitute, who wore “purple and scarlet” and “glittered with gold, precious jewels, and pearls” (17:4), and with Babylon, “the great city” that was “dressed in fine linen, purple, and

scarlet” (18:16). The “bright and pure” nature of these clothes symbolizes the spiritual purity of her walk with the Lord (compare the “white robes” of 3:4; 6:11; 7:9, 13, 14). The seven angels carrying the “seven plagues” in 15:6 wear “pure bright linen,” and in 19:14 the armies of heaven have “white, pure linen.” Thus, the imagery suggests both purity and victory (it was worn by conquering Roman generals). These are the wedding garments of the bride, as in Isa. 61:10, “He has clothed me with garments of salvation . . . as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.” God has given the victorious church “bright pure linen” to symbolize her triumph and the purity she has maintained. As Giesen (1997: 412) brings out, this fine Egyptian linen signals the arrival of the bride and the completion of God’s plan of salvation.

The fine linen is now defined as τὰ δικαιώματα τῶν ἁγίων (*ta dikaiōmata tōn hagiōn*, the righteous deeds of the saints).^[3] Building on Beale (1999: 935–37, 941–42), I take τῶν ἁγίων as a general genitive (note Zerwick 1963: §§36–39). First and foremost, it is subjective, meaning “the righteous deeds done by the saints” (cf. 22:11, “Let the one who does right continue to do right”). But it is also objective, meaning “righteous acts performed for the saints by God,” namely his vindication of them (see the other uses of the δικ- word group in 15:3, 4; 16:5, 7; 19:2, 11, which all refer to the “just” actions of God in vindicating his people). Δικαιώματα as in 15:4 (the “righteous deeds” of God “have been revealed”) refers to “the results of δικαιοῶ: ‘what is made right,’ ‘right conduct’” (Kertelge, *EDNT* 1:334), namely, those acts of faithful perseverance and obedience described above.

b. Command to Write (19:9–10)

John has been told to write^[4] on several occasions, always at a key juncture of the book: at the beginning (1:11), in the letters to the seven churches (chaps. 2–3), at the revelation of the new heavens and new earth (21:5), and in two of the seven beatitudes in the book (14:13 and here). This is the fourth beatitude and introduces another metaphor for the believers. In 19:7 they are the bride of the Lamb, while here they are οἱ εἰς τὸ δεῖπνον τοῦ γάμου τοῦ ἀρνίου κεκλημένοι (*hoi eis to deipnon tou gamou tou arniou keklēmenoi*, those invited^[5] to the wedding^[6] supper of the Lamb). Thus, the saints are both the bride and the invited guests. Such mixing of metaphors was common in the ancient world to add richness to the imagery. Again God is in control. He not only “gives” the wedding garment to the bride but “calls” those he wishes to the wedding supper. This parallels 17:14, where the believers are “his called, chosen, and faithful followers.” But it is debated whether the verb here connotes election (so Beale 1999: 945) or simply means “invited” (Ladd, Johnson, Aune). In reality, this is not an either-or proposition. In the context, it certainly refers to the “invited” guests, but at the same time it is God’s invitation, and that is based on those he has “called” and “chosen” to be his.^[7]

The idea of the wedding supper here is similar to the beatitude of Luke 14:15, “Blessed is the man who will eat at the feast in the kingdom of God”; of Jesus’ saying in Matt. 8:11 (par.), “Many will come from the east and the west, and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven”; and of Jesus’ promise to the disciples in Luke 22:30, “You may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom.” The messianic feast was a common theme in Judaism, building on Isa. 25:6, “On this mountain the LORD Almighty will prepare a feast of rich food for all peoples, a banquet of aged wine—the best of meats and the finest of wines”; and developed further during the intertestamental period, for example, 1 Enoch 62.14, “The Lord of the Spirits will abide with them; they shall eat and rest and rise with that Son of Man forever and ever” (cf. 12–16); 2 Bar. 29.8, “The treasury of manna will come down again from on high, and they will eat of it in those years because these are they who will have arrived at the consummation of time” (cf. 1–8); or

2 Esdr. (4 Ezra) 2:38, “Rise and stand, and see at the feast of the Lord the number of those who have been sealed” (cf. 2:33–41; T. Isaac 6.22; 8.6; T. Jacob 7.21–28; 1QSa 2.11–21; see Behm, *TDNT* 2:35; Priest 1992: 223–34; Aune 1998b: 1033–34).

The angel concludes by saying “These are οἱ λόγοι ἀληθινοὶ τοῦ θεοῦ (*hoi logoi alēthinoi tou theou*, the true words of God),” a saying repeated in 21:5 and 22:6 (“These words are faithful and true”). It functions similarly to the formula in the Pastoral Epistles, “This is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance” (1 Tim. 1:15; 3:1; 4:9; 2 Tim. 2:11; Titus 3:8), or to the “Amen” sayings in the Gospels. Both were used to anchor a particularly important truth. That is the purpose here as well. The question is whether this refers only to the beatitude (P. Hughes, Wall, Thomas), to the sayings on the wedding feast (Ladd, Johnson, Mounce, Beale), to the section of which this is a part (17:1–19:8; so Lohmeyer, Beasley-Murray, Giesen), to the last section of the book from chapter 12 on (Roloff), or to the book as a whole (Kiddle, Sweet). It is impossible to be certain, of course, but it is probably best not to take this too broadly. If 19:9–10 concluded a major section of the book (e.g., 17:1–19:10), then this would likely refer to that section. But it is better to see this as part of the opening section of 19:6–22:5, so it is better to take this as referring to this particular sayings section dealing with the messianic banquet, 19:6–10.

John’s natural response to the incredible truths he has been told is to fall on his knees (19:10). Since he was talking to an angelic herald, not to God or Christ, falling down in worship was inappropriate. It would be tantamount to idolatry, even though that was not John’s intention. Such worship in the light of divine revelation was fairly common and in the Apocalypse will occur again at 22:8. Bauckham (1993b: 120–32) gives a detailed history of the motif of an angel’s rejecting worship. He believes that this theme developed in Jewish apocalyptic to safeguard monotheism from the natural response to the heavenly realm, worship, which was commonly given to angels as well. Thus, in several passages angels caution such responses and direct the worship to God, as in Tob. 12:15–22, where the archangel Raphael refuses obeisance; or Apoc. Zeph. 6.11–15, where the seer is told, “Don’t worship me. I am not the Lord Almighty, but I am the great angel Eremiel, who is over the abyss and Hades.” In Asc. Isa. 7.21–22 Isaiah is told, “Worship neither throne, nor angel from the six heavens. . . . For above all the heavens and their angels is placed your throne.”^[8] Then in 8.5 the angelic guide says, “I am not your lord, but your companion” (cf. also Jos. As. 15.11–12; Apocalypse of Paul; Apocryphal Gospel of Matthew 3.3; 3 Enoch 16.1–5; Acts 10:25–26). Thus, John is using a common apocalyptic theme here. Stuckenbruck (1994: 681–82) finds five form-critical aspects in such stories: an angelomorphic context, the reverential posture of the seer, an explicit rejection of such reverence, a self-denunciation of the angel to the level of the seer, and an attempt to redirect the devotion to God. But why at this juncture? It almost certainly has to do with the high worship scene of 19:1–8. The “hallelujah” hymns have established such a tone of worship that John has to fall on his knees. Some have argued that an angel cult existed in Asia (Swete, Moffatt, Morris, Thomas), but there is no evidence of such a problem elsewhere in the book, neither in the letters to the churches nor in the warnings against idolatry. Yet it probably does continue the prohibition against idolatry that is so prevalent in the book.

The angel then tells John, “Ὁρα μὴ· σύνδουλός σου εἰμι (*Hora mē; syndoulos sou eimi*, Don’t do it;^[9] I am your fellow slave). The idea of the angel as a σύνδουλος of believers is important theologically. Angels are not above human beings but equal to them; both “serve” God (see 7:15 and 22:3 for the saints “serving” God) and will stand beside one another in eternity. Thus, all the “brothers and sisters” are parallel to angels because they^[10] maintain τὴν μαρτυρίαν Ἰησοῦ (*tēn martyrian Iēsou*, the testimony of Jesus). This has become a semitechnical phrase in the book (1:2, 9;

12:17), where it is a general genitive meaning “our testimony about Jesus in response to his testimony about God.” Thus, it is faithful testimony about Christ in the midst of opposition and persecution that renders a believer a “fellow slave” with the angels. As Ford (1975a: 285) brings out, here it is primarily an objective genitive, referring to the church’s testimony to Jesus.

This “testimony about Jesus” is further defined as τὸ πνεῦμα τῆς προφητείας (*to pneuma tēs prophēteias*, lit., “the spirit of prophecy”). There are several options for the meaning of this enigmatic phrase. Many (Ladd, Morris, Michaels) take “spirit” as meaning “essence” or “heart” and interpret it as “testifying about Jesus is the heart of prophecy.” If Ἰησοῦ is a subjective genitive, it could mean “the testimony Jesus gave is the essence of prophecy” (Beckwith, Kiddle, Farrer, Kraft, Johnson, Sweet) or “it is the Spirit who gave them prophecy” (de Smidt 1994: 241).^[11] Others understand πνεῦμα as the Holy Spirit and τῆς προφητείας as an objective genitive, “the Spirit inspiring prophecy” (Lohmeyer; Caird; Lampe 1984: 253–55; Krodel; Aune). Some (Swete, Beasley-Murray, Giesen) combine the second and third and say the testimony that Jesus bore is the heart of Spirit-inspired prophecy.^[12] Ford (1975a: 288–89) says that the Spirit brought about a new age of prophecy and that this alludes to Pentecost continued in this book as a sign of the new covenant. Beale (1999: 947) sees πνεῦμα as a collective or distributive singular and τῆς προφητείας as a descriptive genitive; in this way believers maintaining their testimony are “prophetic people.”

One must decide among these options on the basis of the themes of the book and the immediate context. As several point out (Ford, Bauckham, Aune), second temple Judaism had a strong emphasis on Spirit-inspired prophecy, and in Revelation the Holy Spirit is strongly present in a prophetic role (the letters to the seven churches; 14:13; 22:17—all the places where the Holy Spirit is explicitly mentioned). Moreover, he is called “Spirit” rather than “Holy Spirit” in this book. Thus, it is likely that this passage continues that theme and centers on the Spirit’s activity. Also, “prophecy” is emphasized as an essential component in the visions and their transmission (1:3; 22:7, 10, 18–19), and every time the term refers to prophetic activity (see also 11:6). “Prophets” are also mentioned (11:18; 16:6; 18:20, 24; 22:6, 9) as a particular office in the church. Therefore, τῆς προφητείας is most likely an objective genitive meaning “Spirit-inspired prophecy.” Thus, this is saying that when the saints maintain the testimony about Jesus, the Spirit is inspiring them in the same way as the prophets. As Bauckham (1993b: 161–62) points out, some distinction should be made between the prophets and the Christian community; he concludes: “The Spirit speaks through the prophets to the churches and through the churches to the world.”

2. The Conquering Christ Arrives with Armies of Heaven (19:11–16)

All the emphasis on Christ as the conquering ram and divine warrior in the book (1:14–16; 2:12, 16, 18; 5:6b; 6:16; 11:15; 12:11; 14:14; 17:14) culminate in this passage. Here the parousia of Christ is seen from the vantage point of the conquering King who has come to destroy his enemies and establish his reign. There are two segments in this section: the characteristics of the rider on the white horse (19:11–16) and his actions (19:14–16). Rissi (1965) identifies seven qualities (how he appears to the church: faithful and true, just judgment, penetrating eyes of fire, many crowns as the eschatological Lord, absolutely God with the name no one but himself knows, redeeming the church with his blood, absolute truth as the Word of God) and four actions (how he appears to the world: the sword of judgment, shepherding them with the iron club, treading the winepress of God’s wrath, demonstrating his kingship and lordship). While the strict identification of the first with the church and the second with the world is “too tidy to fit the data, since in each section

these traits are not restricted to the redeemed or the wicked” (Beale 1999: 949), the general organization is correct. Aune (1998b: 1051) points out the number of parallels that seem to show “the author has incorporated imagery from the Roman triumph into his description”: the white horse, the diadems, the title inscribed on the rider, the armies accompanying him, the military imagery, and decisive victory. This means that the victory is so certain that the very battle is his triumph.

a. Description of the Rider on the White Horse (19:11–13)

The opening two images govern the whole. First, John sees “the heaven opened,”^[13] already viewed in 4:1 at the beginning of these visions. Thus, the visions of the events of the last days are framed with the sight of “heaven opened,” meaning God is about to act on earth in a decisive way (cf. also 11:19 and 15:5, in which the heavenly temple is opened), building on Ezek. 1:1, where the heavens are opened as God sends visions to Ezekiel. At Jesus’ baptism (Mark 1:10 par.) and in his inaugural interaction with the disciples (John 1:51), the theme of the “open heaven” also dominates. In Acts 7:56; 10:11; and 2 Cor. 12:1–2, the idea of heaven opened in these last days continues as a major motif in the early church. The thrust is that the consummation of God’s acts in human history has arrived. The eschaton is here. Then comes “the rider on a white horse,” in contrast to the first horseman of the Apocalypse, who also rode a white horse (6:2). The color white does not indicate purity, as it does when describing the garments of the righteous (3:4–5; 6:11; 7:9, 13–14) but indicates a warhorse and shows the one who comes is a conquering king. Then follows the seven descriptions of the Warrior Messiah at his parousia:

1. He is “called” πιστὸς καὶ ἀληθινός (*pistos kai alēthinos*, Faithful and True), building on the character of Christ in 1:5 (“faithful witness”) and especially 3:14 (“faithful and true witness”). As “faithful” (1:5; 3:14), Jesus is the model for his followers, who are also called to “faithfulness” (2:10, 13; 13:10; 14:12; 17:14), that is, to remain true to God in a hostile world. Christ is also “true” to his calling and purposes (see 3:7, 14; 19:11), as God is also “true” in his righteous deeds and judgment (6:10; 15:3; 16:7; 19:2, 9). In this context, it means that the final war is mandated because Christ is “faithful” to his calling and “true” in his justice (see 16:7 and 19:2, “True and just are your judgments”). This prepares for the description of the words of the book as πιστοὶ καὶ ἀληθινοί in 21:5; 22:6. As Jesus is “faithful and true,” and since he is “the Word of God” (19:13), the revelations he has given to John would also be “faithful and true.”

2. As the Warrior Messiah, ἐν δικαιοσύνῃ κρίνει καὶ πολεμεῖ (*en dikaiosynē krinei kai polemei*, in righteousness he judges and makes war).^[14] This is not just divine justice but the “righteousness” of God that is in view. For God to “judge in righteousness” was often emphasized in the Psalms (Ps. 7:11; 9:4, 8; 50:6; 67:4; 72:2; 96:13; 98:9) and in Isa. 11:4 (“With righteousness he will judge the needy”). It means that God dispenses justice on the basis of his own righteous standards, that he always does what is right. As said in Rev. 16:7 and 19:2, “His judgments are true and just (δίκαιαι)” (cf. 15:3). God as judge is frequent in the Apocalypse (6:10; 11:18; 14:7; 16:5, 7; 18:8, 10, 20; 19:2; 20:12–13), and this tells us that that judgment is always right and true. Yet not only does he judge in righteousness, but he also “makes war” in righteousness (ἐν δικαιοσύνῃ modifies both verbs). Since the dragon (12:7, 17; 16:13) and the beast (11:7; 13:4, 7; 16:14; 17:14; 19:19) have “made war” against God and the saints, God and Christ have “gone to war” (2:16; 19:11; cf. 2:26; 17:14; 19:14–16) against their enemies. If there has ever been a “just” or “holy war,” this is the one! The whole theme of *lex talionis* (law of retribution) that has been so prevalent in the book culminates in this passage.

3. His eyes are **ὡς ἰλὸξ πυρός** ([*hōs phlox pyros*, [like] a raging fire) in 19:12, repeating the description of Christ in 1:14 and 2:18. The background is Dan. 10:6 (“his eyes like flaming torches”), where it introduces the “man dressed in linen” (Dan. 10:5) who gives a series of prophecies (chaps. 10–12) regarding the “great war” (Dan. 10:1). Thus, the “eyes [like] a raging fire” refer both to the penetrating vision by which God discerns all and the “fiery” judgment that will result from his all-seeing discernment. It is part of a series of descriptions of the “one like a son of man” (1:12–16) in Rev. 1:14, which is the one passage most like this one. The military cast of those evocative images resembles this section closely. In 2:18 it is part of the title of Christ in the letter to Thyatira and leads into the judgment portion, in which the Lord “searches hearts and minds and . . . will repay each of you according to your deeds.” In other words, there is a distinct aspect of omniscience (sees all) and judgment (repays all) behind this image. Moreover, it is not only the ungodly but also the unfaithful (as at Thyatira) who will face this angry God.

4. He has **διαδήματα πολλά** (*diadēmata polla*, many diadems) on his head. There are two types of “crowns” in Revelation: the **στέφανος** (*stephanos*) or victor’s wreath is worn by the woman in 12:1, by Christ in 14:14, and by the victorious saints in 2:10; 3:11; 4:4; the **διάδημα** or ruler’s crown is worn by the dragon (12:3), the beast (13:1), and Christ (here). The contrast between Christ and the false trinity is quite evident, especially when we realize that these are the only three appearances of **διάδημα** in the NT. Satan and the Antichrist are again guilty of the “great imitation” (see chap. 13), for they are pretenders trying to claim a crown that is not theirs and that they can never have. The “many crowns” relates to the title in 19:16, “King of kings.” Caesar in the Roman Empire and the Antichrist in the final evil empire rule over their vassal kings and so had many “diadems” on their heads (the dragon) and their horns (the beast), but only Jesus is truly “King of kings.” The earthly and demonic rulers were limited, Caesar by the Euphrates (the eastern boundary of the Roman Empire) and Satan/the Antichrist by God, who restricted their reign both spatially (to this world) and temporally (to the end times; cf. the “forty-two months,” etc., of chaps. 11–13). The “many diadems” of Christ are absolute and eternal.

5. Christ has **ὄνομα γεγραμμένον ὃ οὐδεὶς οἶδεν εἰ μὴ αὐτός** (*onoma gegrammenon ho oudeis oiden eimē autos*, a name written that no one knows except he himself). This builds on 2:17, where the victorious saints of Pergamum are promised “a white stone, [on which] there will be a new name written that no one knows except the one who receives it.” Both passages utilize Isa. 62:2, “You will be called by a new name that the mouth of the LORD will bestow” (cf. 65:15). In addition, Christ promises the overcomers in Philadelphia, “I will write on them the name of my God . . . and my new name” (Rev. 3:12). Yet the meaning of the “new name” is much debated. A great deal depends on the connotation of “new.” In Phil. 2:9 he is given “the name that is above every name,” hence many (Farrer, Prigent, Beale) believe the name is Yahweh (Phil. 2:9 is followed by the confession of 2:11, “Jesus Christ is Lord [= Yahweh]”; cf. Rev. 19:16), illustrated by the fact that the high priest wore the inscription “Holy to the LORD [Yahweh]” on a gold plate on his turban (Exod. 39:27–31). But that is difficult because Exod. 3:16 defines the name “Yahweh,” and the “I am” sayings of John all connote the message “Jesus is Yahweh,” so it is hard to conceive of Yahweh as “the new name.” However, if it is “new” not in terms of the name itself but in terms of a new level of revealed meaning (like “Babylon the Great” as a “mystery” in 17:5), then “Yahweh” is possible. In this sense, the basic name is known, but the true meaning and relationship inherent in it cannot be known until the eschaton.

Yet while we must admit to the possibility of this, it is more likely that this is a name hidden until the eschaton. Kraft (1974: 249) points to Matt. 11:27, which states that only the Father knows the

Son, and so we must await a future revelation. It was common in the ancient world to believe that all beings, celestial as well as earthly, had a hidden name that contained their true essence. This is what the demons were doing when they called Jesus “the Holy One of God” (Mark 1:24 par.; cf. 5:7 par.) and other titles. They were trying to gain power over Jesus by uttering his true name (see Twelftree, *DJG* 166). Therefore, the “new name no one knows except he himself” is a title reserved for eternity, the name that will reveal the true nature of the Godhead in a way beyond our finite ability to grasp. As Moses could not see the face of God and live (Exod. 33:20), so we cannot at this time know the true essence of God. That awaits his final revelation.^[15] When we combine this with Rev. 2:17, a new, exciting truth emerges. At the parousia, we will first learn the new name of Christ (19:12) and then will be given that new name for ourselves (2:17). It is written on Christ, and then he will write it on us!

6. In 19:13 he also is περιβεβλημένος ἱμάτιον βεβαμμένον αἵματι (*peribēblēmenos himation bebammenon haimati*, clothed with a garment dipped in blood).^[16] It is difficult to know whether the “blood” is that of Jesus, thus a reference to his atoning sacrifice (1:5; 5:9; 7:14; 12:11; so Morris; Johnson; Sweet; Boring; Reddish 1988: 89; Giesen); the blood of the martyrs (6:10; 16:6; 17:6; 18:24; 19:2; so Caird 1966: 243–44); or the blood of his enemies (14:20; so R. Charles; Swete; Lohmeyer; Krodel; Roloff; Thomas; Michaels; Aune; MacLeod 1999a: 214). All three are viable, but the context is a military one. It is possible that this is a reference to the true victory over the forces of evil that Christ won on the cross, and indeed the strongest argument against this being the blood of his enemies is that the battle has not yet been fought. But this argument fails to consider the circularity of the imagery throughout the Apocalypse. Chronology is ignored for the sake of rhetorical effect. Note also the comments above regarding the imagery of the Roman triumph throughout this passage. The actual order is the preparation for battle, the battle, victory, and then the triumphant procession (often as much as a year later, as in Julius Caesar’s triumph over the Gauls). But here all these images are jumbled together, undoubtedly because the victory and triumph are already secured (note the present and perfect tenses throughout this section). The same is true of the possibility that it is the blood of the martyrs. It would make sense but does not fit the context as well. Thus, Christ’s robe is dipped in the blood of his enemies, a reference to Isa. 63:1–3, which combines this with the imagery of the winepress (cf. Rev. 19:15b below), “I have trodden the winepress alone. . . . Their blood spattered my garments, and I stained all my clothing” (63:3). The God of justice will demonstrate his justice by shedding the blood of his enemies “up to the horses’ bridles” (Rev. 14:20). Again, the gruesome nature of this image must be understood in light of the principle of *lex talionis*; the terrible crimes of the earth-dwellers must be answered by divine retribution.

7. His name is now “called” ὁ λόγος τοῦ θεοῦ (*ho logos tou theou*, the Word of God). This is the third “title” in the list (after “Faithful and True” and “the new name”). There is a striking parallel with the famous *Logos* sayings of John 1:1–14, but this is the only place in the NT where Christ is called “the Word of God,” and the meaning is different here, not so much the “living revealer” of John as the “authoritative Word” of Revelation. This “word of God” also occurs in 1:2, 9; 6:9; 17:17; 19:9; and 20:4, and in most of these places it connotes a similar meaning as in Acts (cf. Acts 4:31; 6:2; 8:14; 11:1), referring to Christian witness to and proclamation of the gospel message. In this case, τοῦ θεοῦ may well be another general genitive, both objective (Jesus “speaks for God”) and source (Jesus’ message is “from God”). In the context, the spoken message is both military and forensic, that is, Jesus proclaims the judgment of God and gives the command for carrying it out. As such it is linked with the sword “from his mouth” in Rev. 19:15, where the “sword” is the sharp word as

well as the instrument of death (see below).

b. Actions of the Rider on the White Horse (19:14–16)

Christ does four things on the basis of his character (19:11–13). These also are both military and judicial (he “judges and makes war”), that is, Christ proclaiming judgment on sinful humanity and then carrying out the sentence of God on them. Many writers have tried to select one or the other, but such selection inevitably diminishes the thrust of the whole. If he indeed is “Faithful and True” to his calling and is “the Word of God,” then he must act on the basis of his character as judge and Warrior Messiah.

First, τὰ στρατεύματα [τὰ] ἐν τῷ οὐρανῷ (*ta strateumata [ta] en tō ouranō*, the armies in heaven) follow him as he comes in judgment. It is difficult to decide whether these armies consist of angels (Swete, Ladd, Kraft, Beasley-Murray, Roloff) or the saints (R. Charles; Caird; Wall; Harrington; Giesen; Beale; MacLeod 1999a: 214) or perhaps both (Loh-meyer, Krodel, Aune). In the OT and intertestamental literature, the angelic host is often pictured as the army of God (Gen. 32:1–2; Josh. 5:13–15; 2 Kings 6:17; Ps. 103:20–21; 1 Enoch 1.4; 2 Enoch 17) that executes his judgment (Joel 2:2, 11; 1 Enoch 1.9). Zechariah 14:5 is especially apropos: “The LORD my God will come, and all his holy ones [the angelic host] with him.” In the NT this theme of the angelic host accompanying the parousia is common (Matt. 13:41; 16:27; 25:31; 1 Thess. 3:13; 2 Thess. 1:7; Jude 14). Thus, it is probable that those who read of the “heavenly armies” here would have thought of the heavenly host.

Yet at the same time, Rev. 17:14 has already said that at the parousia, “accompanying him will be the called and the elect and the faithful.” Moreover, one could read into ἡκολουθεῖ (*ēkolouthēi*, follow) an aspect of discipleship, as it is used that way in 14:4 (“They follow the Lamb wherever he goes”). Therefore, it is likely that the “heavenly army” will consist of both angels and saints. Like the Lord (19:11), the heavenly army also rides “white (war)horses,” picturing them as a conquering force. Both will wear “white, pure linen,” similar to the “fine linen, bright and pure,” worn by the bride in 19:8. Yet in Revelation, both celestial beings (4:4; 15:6) and believers (3:4–5; 6:11; 7:9, 13–14; 19:8) wear white, so it is fitting that both celestial and human beings wear white as part of the Lord’s armies. As white linen was worn by the conquering general at a Roman triumph, this is also fitting.

It is difficult to know whether the heavenly armies will fight. Most have assumed they will not because it appears there is no battle. When the armies of the Antichrist gather for battle (19:19), the sword comes out of Christ’s mouth (19:15), and the battle is over in an instant (19:20–21). However, 2:26–27 says the victors will be “given authority” to “rule [the nations] with the rod of iron,” to “shatter them like pottery.” This is the same verse (Ps. 2:9) and same image (rule with the “rod of iron”) used of Christ in 19:15b. Thus, it seems that in some way the saints and angels participate in the destruction of the evil forces. Miller (1998: 315–16) says the army does fight a battle (2:27; 17:14).

Second, in 19:15 there are three successive images of the total conquest and destruction the returning Christ will achieve over the nations, all building on previous material in the book. First, out of his mouth will come ῥομφαία ὀξεῖα (*rhomphaia oxeia*, a sharp sword), the same “sharp, two-edged sword” that proceeds from the mouth of Christ in 1:16 and is held by Christ in 2:12, 16. The sword was the symbol of Roman authority over life and death, an authority that only the emperor and his governors held (see on 2:12). The message here is that Christ alone has the final authority of life and death. As in 1:16 and 2:12, 16, this language echoes Isa. 11:4 and 49:2. In Isa. 11:4 the branch from Jesse “will strike the earth with the rod of his mouth,” referring to the justice with

which he will rule the earth; and in Isa. 49:2 God has anointed the servant of Yahweh and “made my mouth like a sharpened sword,” referring to the power of his word to save Israel and “strike the nations” (Isa. 11:4d) so as to deliver God’s people. This theme occurs frequently in Jewish apocalyptic that also builds on Isaiah to say “the word of his mouth will do the sinners in” (1 Enoch 62.2), or the Messiah will “destroy the unlawful nations with the word of his mouth” (Ps. Sol. 17.24; cf. also 17.35–36), or the Messiah “sent forth from his mouth as it were a stream of fire” and burned up those “gathered to wage war” (2 Esdr. [4 Ezra] 13:8, 10–11). This is continued in 2 Thess. 2:8, which says the Lord will “overthrow” the man of lawlessness “with the breath of his mouth.” Here in Rev. 19:15 this idea flows out of the description of Christ as “the Word of God” and refers to Jesus’ proclamation of judgment on the forces of evil. As a result, many believe this is a picture of forensic judgment rather than military destruction. This is the proclamation of judgment rather than the execution of it. But that is to ignore the larger context. Most certainly the destruction of the nations is just as central as the judicial act of proclamation (19:21, “The rest *were killed* with the sword that came out of [his] mouth”). Both aspects are intended here.

That is especially seen in the next image, building on Ps. 2:9, which says the Messiah “will rule [the nations] with an iron scepter” and “dash them to pieces like pottery.”^[17] Here only the first part is quoted, Christ “shepherding” (ποιμανεῖ, *poimanei*)^[18] them “with a rod of iron.” But the entire passage is quoted in Rev. 2:26–27, in which the victorious saints are promised a share in this messianic judgment. The “iron scepter” is actually the shepherd’s club that kills the enemies of the sheep (see on 2:27), so this has the same force as the “sharp sword” in the previous image. The “shepherding” is not the care of the sheep here but the destruction of their predatory foes (as in 12:5, where Ps. 2:9 is also used).

Third, as he destroys the nations, he will πατεῖ τὴν ληνὸν τοῦ οἴνου τοῦ θυμοῦ τῆς ὀργῆς τοῦ θεοῦ τοῦ παντοκράτορος (*patei tēn lēnon tou oīnou tou thymou tēs orgēs tou theou tou pantokratoros*, trample the winepress, namely, the furious wrath^[19] of God Almighty). This combines two passages: 14:19–20, where the nations are “thrown into the great winepress of the wrath of God,” and 16:19, where God “gave [Babylon the Great] the cup filled with wine, namely his furious wrath.” The winepress in 14:19–20 is a terrible image of judgment, as the nations are “trampled” to such an extent that the blood flows “as high as the horses’ bridles.” This alludes to Isa. 63:1–6, echoed in 19:13 with Jesus’ garment “dipped in blood.” In Isa. 63 God “trode the winepress” so that “blood spattered [his] garments” (63:2–3) and “poured their blood on the ground” (63:6). The shedding of their blood will be just payment for their shedding the blood of the saints (6:10; 16:6; 17:6; 18:24; 19:2). This will be carried out because it is “God Almighty” (one of the primary titles of God in the book; see on 1:8), the one whose omnipotence guarantees that justice will be done.

Fourth, the rider on the white horse (19:16) has a name written ἐπὶ τὸ ἱμάτιον καὶ ἐπὶ τὸν μηρὸν αὐτοῦ (*epi to himation kai epi ton mēron autou*, on his garment at his thigh), which could refer to two places, but most agree (e.g., Beckwith, Ladd, Mounce, Beale) that it is “on his robe, namely [exegetical καί] his thigh.” In other words, the name is written on that part of his tunic that covered his thigh, the place where his sword would rest and where it would be conspicuous on a mounted warrior.^[20] Here we have the fourth title in this section (vv. 11, 12b, 13b), and this is the concluding name that is particularly apt in a Roman setting, Βασιλεὺς βασιλέων καὶ κύριος κυρίων (*Basileus basileōn kai kyrios kyriōn*, King of kings and Lord of lords). It is not Caesar but Christ who is sovereign over all other earthly rulers. The Antichrist is ruler over his vassal kings (chap. 17), but Christ is sovereign over all. This title was already given to Christ in 17:14, where it anchored the certainty of the Lord’s victory over the armies of the Antichrist. The title occurs in

the LXX (Dan. 4:37 Theodotion; cf. Deut. 10:17; Dan. 2:37), intertestamental literature (1 Enoch 9.4; cf. 2 Macc. 13:4; 1 Enoch 63.4), and NT (1 Tim. 6:15), where it is always used of God. Thus, this is another place where the divinity of Christ is stressed—the Warrior Messiah is God himself!

3. Invitation to Carrion Birds for Another Messianic Banquet (19:17–18)

Another καὶ εἶδον (*kaieidon*, Then I saw) indicates a subsection of the narrative. The vision switches focus from the returning Christ to the armies arrayed against him. Christ is descending from heaven with his celestial army made up of saints and angels, and now the scene opens up to the situation on earth. Introducing this situation is “an angel standing in the sun.” In 1:16 Christ’s “face was like the sun,” applying the description of Yahweh (Ps. 84:11; Isa. 60:19) to him. Building on this, 10:1 has a mighty angel whose “face is like the sun,” and in 12:1 the woman is “clothed with the sun.” This is the third passage in which God’s servants are imbued with his radiant character. Also, in 18:1 an angel comes down and “illuminates the earth with his glory.” As Beale (1999: 965) points out, the connection with 18:1–2 is enhanced because in both, the angelic herald is filled with the radiance of God and cries out a judgment oracle associated with scavenger birds. In the first, the judgment is the utter desolation of Babylon the Great (18:2–3), and here it is the utter destruction of the armies of the beast (19:17–18).

The message^[21] is gruesome and powerful, guaranteeing before the battle has been joined that the end result is certain. The angel commands all the birds, συνάχθητε (*synachthēte*, gather together), ironically the same verb used in 16:14, 16 for the false trinity “gathering together” the nations for the final battle. At the same time as the evil forces gather for Armageddon, the carrion birds are called to gather for the aftermath of the inevitable slaughter. These birds are “flying in midair” like the eagle in 8:13 and the angel in 14:6. All three are part of a message from God regarding the terrible judgment to come.^[22] Then the angel invites the birds to attend τὸ δεῖπνον τὸ μέγα τοῦ θεοῦ (*to deipnon to mega tou theou*, the great banquet of God), an obvious parody of the invitation to the saints to attend “the wedding supper of the Lamb” in 19:9 (see Lohse, Schüssler Fiorenza, Prigent, Krodel). There will be two great messianic banquets at the eschaton: the feast with the Lamb for the saints and the feast on the sinners for the carrion birds. The saints will partake of the great banquet, and the sinners will be the great banquet! This image is drawn from Ezek. 39:17–20, where the judgment against Gog is punctuated by an invitation to the birds and wild animals to “come together” for “the great sacrifice on the mountains of Israel,” where they will “eat the flesh of mighty men and drink the blood of the princes of the earth.” The difference is that in Ezekiel the call to the scavengers comes after the defeat and burial of Gog, while here it comes before those events. This gives the scene great rhetorical power. Block (1998: 474) shows the formal nature of the invitation to a royal banquet in Ezek. 39:17–18, proceeding from the address to the herald to the notice of the Lord making the invitation to the commission of the herald and the formal invitation itself, followed by the signature of Yahweh himself. Here there is only the invitation, but it also has a formal tone about it, and this makes the contents just as grotesque as in Ezekiel.

Drawing from Ezek. 39:18, the invitation now lists those who will provide food for the birds (19:18). It also follows the pattern of 6:15 and 13:16 in stating the various social distinctions among peoples so as to emphasize the universality of the judgment. This list begins with the military—kings, generals,^[23] mighty warriors, horses and their riders—and then proceeds to the basic social categories—“the flesh of free and slave and of the small and the great.” One question is whether this means the destruction of all the earth-dwellers or the destruction of the army. This will be

important for the question of the thousand-year reign in 20:1–10, and I argue that it is the army that is being pictured rather than all peoples of the earth, for there must be some present to follow the dragon when he is released in 20:7. Thus, this is a rhetorical list to show that everyone who participates in Armageddon will be destroyed.

4. Swift Battle and Its Aftermath (19:19–21)

The false trinity began preparing for Armageddon in the sixth bowl judgment of 16:13–16, sending out their own (fallen) angelic heralds to call “the kings of the whole world” (the same vassal kings as in 17:12–14; 18:9–10) to “gather together” for the final battle. This is a direct continuance of 16:14, 16, for we first see “the beast and the kings of the earth and their armies gathered,” the very language of the earlier passage (for the connection with 20:8, see the discussion of that passage). The implied subject of the passive *συνηγμένα* (*synēgmena*, gathered together) could be the beast (who deceived the nations and called them to war in chap. 16) or God (who is sovereign throughout this chapter). Due to the close connection with 16:14, 16, it is slightly more likely that the beast is implied here. Building on the “heavenly armies” of 19:14, this text also has “their armies” gathered with them. Thus, the participants in “the great day of wrath” of God and the Lamb (6:15; 16:14) are now in effect on opposite hills, awaiting the call to battle. There is a great deal of material on the final eschatological war in the OT (Isa. 31:4; 42:13; 59:17–20; 63:1–5; Ezek. 38–39; Dan. 12:1–3; Joel 1:15; 3:9–16; Mic. 4:11–12; Zech. 12:3–9; 14:2–9) and Jewish apocalyptic (1 Enoch 56.5–8; 90.13–19; 2 Esdr. [4 Ezra] 12:33; 13:29–38; Ps. Sol. 17.21–25; 1QM 9.5; 14.5–6; T. Dan 5.10–11; As. Mos. 16) but less in the NT apart from Revelation (Luke 17:30; 21:27, 34–36; 1 Thess. 5:1–3; 2 Thess. 2:8; all of them ambiguous). This passage is the culmination of all the previous imagery. This is truly “the day of the Lord” prophesied throughout the OT.

Yet there is no battle (Rev. 19:20). It seems that when the sword comes from the Lord’s mouth (19:15), the battle is over instantly. The army following the returning Warrior Messiah (19:14) seemingly takes no part in the conflict, but it is difficult to know how far to take this. In 12:5 the life of Christ is omitted as well, and the narrative skips from his birth to his ascension. Moreover, in 2:26–27 the saints do seem to play a part in “shattering the nations to pieces like pottery,” and one would expect the army of 17:14 and 19:14 to have a role in “conquering” the evil army (also 17:14). Moreover, the battle between Michael and Satan in 12:7–9 is described briefly (both “make war” against each other), and it is likely that this would follow a similar pattern, especially since the final battle is also stressed in OT and apocalyptic literature (see previous verse). Thus, it is probable that there is a battle,^[24] but it is omitted to emphasize the absolute superiority of the “King of kings and Lord of lords.”

The results of the final eschatological war are twofold: the beast and false prophet are captured (19:20), and their army is destroyed (19:21). We are told first that the two beasts ἐπιάσθη (*epiasthē*, were seized), another divine passive with the implicit subject being Christ. Louw and Nida (1988: 1:221) say the verb connotes “to take hold of firmly and with a considerable amount of force.” Thus, the beast and false prophet are captured by the conquering Christ.

They are then described in language drawn from 13:12–15 and 16:14. First, the false prophet “had done” counterfeit “miraculous signs” to win the adoration of the earth-dwellers (13:13; 16:14), then he “deceived” (13:14) them, forcing them to “accept the mark of the beast” (13:16–17) and “worship his image” (13:14–15). As in 17:2; 18:3, 5–7, 20, 24, this litany of their sins provides the legal charges against them that necessitated the judgment that will occur in the next clause.

After their guilty verdict and defeat in battle, the sentence is carried out. As the dragon was

ἐβλήθη εἰς (*ēblēthē eis*, thrown to) the earth (12:9), so the beast and false prophet are “thrown into” (ἐβλήθησαν εἰς) the “lake of fire that burns with sulfur.” Interestingly, they are said to be cast into the fiery lake ζῶντες (*zōntes*, alive—first for emphasis). This is the first of four groups cast into eternal punishment. But when the devil (20:10), Death and Hades (20:14a), and the unbelievers (20:14b) are cast into the “lake of fire,” there is no mention that they are thrown in “alive.” The connotation is *conscious* punishment in the lake of fire, and it may well be that John expected the reader to remember that with respect to the other three groups. This is another problem for those holding to an “annihilation” view of final judgment (see additional note on 14:11); if the eternal torment depicted in the NT is conscious punishment, the idea of unbelievers ceasing to exist becomes difficult to uphold. Swete (1911: 258) points to a parallel in Num. 16:30, 33, where the Lord caused the earth to open and swallow Korah, Dathan, and Abihu, so that they went “down alive into the grave” (also Ps. 55:15). The purpose was to stress the horror of the punishment.

Τὴν λίμνην τοῦ πυρός (*tēn limnēn tou pyros*, the lake of fire) occurs only in Rev. 19–21 in the NT, and the background is difficult to trace. Bertrand (1999) says the origin of the “lake of fire” comes from a combination of two images, with the “fire” stemming from traditions regarding the destruction of Sodom by fire and sulfur (Gen. 19:24 = Luke 17:29–30; 1 Enoch 21.7–10; 67.4–13; 90.25) and the “lake” stemming from Hellenistic mythical portrayals of hell. The basic connection with “Gehenna,” of course, is certain. “Sheol” (OT) or “Hades” (NT) refers to the grave, while “Gehenna” refers to eternal fiery punishment. The name Gehenna derived originally from the Valley of Hinnom on the south slope of Jerusalem, which became notorious during the evil reigns of Ahaz and Manasseh, when their own children were burned as sacrifices to the god Molech (2 Chron. 28:3; 33:6). It was condemned and became a symbol for future punishment (Isa. 66:24; Jer. 7:30–33). Thus, “Gehenna” symbolized the place of final punishment, located in the depths of the earth (Sib. Or. 4.184–86) and associated with eternal torment (Sib. Or. 2.292–310). In Jesus’ day it was the city dump, and the fires never went out due to the burning garbage. In Jesus’ teaching, Gehenna was also the symbol for eternal fiery punishment (Mark 9:43, 45, 47 par.; Matt. 10:28 par.; 18:9; 23:15; cf. 25:46). Thus, the idea of final fiery punishment has a rich history behind it (see Lunde, *DJG* 310–11).

The depiction of a “lake of fire” as an extension of Gehenna also has its background in apocalyptic ideas. First, Dan. 7:9–11 speaks of “a river of fire” flowing from God’s throne, and the “beast” (the “little horn” of Dan. 7:8) is killed and his body “thrown into the blazing fire” (Dan. 7:11). Building on this, 1 Enoch 54.1 speaks of “a valley, deep and burning with fire,” and in 90.24–27 the wicked are thrown into “a fiery abyss and burned” (cf. 48.9, “burn . . . and sink”). Second Enoch 10.2 speaks of “a river of fire” and Sib. Or. 2.196 of “a great river of blazing fire” (cf. 2.196–209). Thus, the idea of a “lake of fire” was a natural extension of these ideas. The choice of λίμνη rather than θάλασσα (*thalassa*) is probably meant to separate this from the “sea” that is a symbol of evil (13:1; 20:13); technically, it depicts a “relatively small body of water” like a pool (Louw and Nida 1988: 1:14), but it is doubtful this is part of the imagery, since all the unbelievers and demonic forces are cast into it (20:14–15).

Connected with the capture of the beast and false prophet in 19:21 is the destruction of the armies. Now we see even more clearly the military aspect of the “sword that came out of the mouth.” Still, many take the sword of 19:15, 21 as a legal proclamation uttering the sentence of death.^[25] Aune (1998b: 1067), for instance, gives an example from Ps. Sol. 17.24, where the Davidic Messiah slays “the unlawful nations with the word of his mouth.” Yet the military imagery in this verse goes beyond the sentence of death to the execution of that sentence (see also on 19:15). This is clearly the sword of destruction, and every member of the evil army is killed (see also Giesen

1997: 427, who speaks of the incredible punishment by which they are instantaneously killed). Now we have arrived at a further fulfillment of the promise given to the martyrs in 6:11 (“wait a short time longer until the number of their fellow slaves, that is, their brothers and sisters who are about to die just as they had, is to be completed”). The number of the martyrs is now complete, and their hour of vindication is here (see also 16:5–7; 18:20, 24; 19:2).

The feast promised to the scavenger birds in 19:17–18 is now here. “All the birds” who come *ἐχορτάσθησαν* (*echortasthēsan*, gorged themselves) on the corpses. This is a graphic verb connoting a gluttonous feast on the “flesh” of the dead kings and their soldiers. There is another aspect of *lex talionis* here. In 11:7–10 the beast slays the two prophets and then refuses them burial (11:9). The same indignity is now shown the dead army. Aune (1998b: 1067–68) shows how terrible this was, calling it “an ancient curse formula” that has now been actualized. In several OT texts (Deut. 28:26; 1 Sam. 17:44, 46; 1 Kings 14:11; 16:4; 21:24), being eaten by dogs or birds is the ultimate degradation, and in Jer. 7:33; 16:4; 19:7; and 34:20, this became a prophetic curse. In 1QM 11.1 those destroyed in the final eschatological battle will remain unburied. This was the ultimate humiliation in the ancient world. Thus, God is returning upon the heads of the unbelievers what they have done to the saints.

Summary and Contextualization

At the moment I am writing this, my oldest daughter is about to send out her wedding invitations. There are few events in this life more joyous, and we are all excited. To receive such an invitation from a relative or loved one is a great privilege. We have all awaited such good news from time to time, and to receive such a letter, whether to a wedding or major event or news of a major award, is thrilling. At the opposite extreme is a summons to a judgment, whether a traffic ticket or an upcoming audit or, even worse, an indictment before the court. These two types of invitations dominate 19:6–21, which is one of the culminating points of the Bible, the parousia or second coming of Christ.

First, we see the parousia from the perspective of the believer. The first part of the “hallelujah” choruses celebrated the vindication of the suffering saints in the destruction of “the great prostitute” (19:1–5). Now the second part (19:6–10) celebrates the final eternal “reign” of the “Lord God Almighty,” who has now initiated “the wedding supper of the Lamb” (with the great antithesis between the prostitute and the bride). In Mark 14:25 and parallels, Jesus prophesied, “I will not drink again of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it anew in the kingdom of God.” This is that day and that messianic banquet. It is important to note that the bride’s trousseau is made up of her “righteous deeds.” This sums up the NT emphasis on the importance of “works” in the Christian life. The old adage is never more true than here: “You are saved by grace; you will be judged by works” (cf. 2:23; 14:13; 18:6; 20:12–13; and 22:12 for the fact that both the saved and the unsaved will be “judged by works”). Then the vision switches analogies; believers are both the bride of the Lamb and those invited to the wedding banquet. The emphasis here is on divine sovereignty; God, not humankind, decides who will be invited. Our task is to be ready at all times. Finally, as John is about to worship the angel, he is told severely that only God is worthy of worship. Angelolatry (the worship of angels) is a form of idolatry. This has relevance for the fad today to place angels on too high a pedestal. We must remember that they are not higher beings than us; they are in reality our “fellow servants,” so long as we continue to “serve” God by maintaining our “testimony about Jesus.”

Second, we see the parousia from the vantage point of the unbeliever. In 19:11–21 Jesus is the Warrior Messiah who has come not just to rescue the saints but also to destroy the sinners. E. Peterson (1988: 159) speaks of the contrast between the meal and the war, each defining the two sides of salvation: “Salvation is the intimacies and the festivities of marriage; salvation is aggressive battle and the defeat of evil. Salvation is neither of these things by itself. It is the two energies, the embrace of love and the assault on evil, in polar tension, each defined by the other, each feeding into the other.” The return of Christ begins with the opening of heaven (finalizing that begun with the splitting of the heavens at Jesus’ baptism, Mark 1:10 par.).

The first part of the section is divided into the character of the Warrior Messiah (19:11–13) and his actions (19:14–16). He comes on a white warhorse as the conquering hero, and he has several names, each summing up major motifs in the book: he is the “Faithful and True,” signifying both his model as “faithful witness” (1:5; 3:14) and the one who brings true justice (15:3; 16:7). He has a “name only he knows,” one that cannot be known until the eschaton and that shows his true essence, a name that we will share (2:17). He is also “the Word of God,” the one who is the authoritative Word of God, and as such he is both judge and executioner. Finally, he is “King of kings and Lord of lords,” which means he (not the dragon or the beast) is sovereign over the kings of earth. When he returns, he will do so as the triumphant Lord and not as the Suffering Servant (as in his first coming). The rest of the descriptions of 19:11–16 bear out this theme. That which typified the emperor to pagan Romans and will typify the Antichrist to deluded humanity, Christ and Christ alone will in the final sense exemplify. His judgment and warfare will be completely “righteous,” that is, it will be both just and true. His eyes will be blazing fire, that is, he will see all and know all, and his judgment will be done with finality. His robe drips with the blood of his enemies in anticipation of the absolute final victory. The heavenly army, composed of the angels and the victorious saints, accompany him, and he destroys the forces of evil with the sword from his mouth, that is, both the proclamation of guilt and the execution of the sentence (1:16). Further identifying this are two other images drawn from the book: shepherding the nations with the rod of iron, which is the shepherd’s club that shatters and destroys (2:27), and the winepress, which is the image of divine wrath and destruction (14:17–20).

The actual “battle of Armageddon” (cf. 16:13–16) is almost an anticlimax. First, an angel calls all the carrion birds to God’s second great messianic banquet, feasting on the bodies of the fallen soldiers of evil after Armageddon (19:17–18). The promise is that everyone who participates in that final “great day of wrath” (6:17; 16:14), from the greatest to the least, will be slaughtered. Next, the battle is described, only there is no battle. The armies are arrayed and ready (19:19), but no actual battle is recorded. The might of the Warrior Messiah is too great, and it is over virtually before it has begun (see above on whether there will be an actual battle). Two of the false trinity (the beast and the false prophet) are seized and consigned to their places in the lake of fire, that picture of eternal torment that builds on 14:10b–11. Then the armies are slaughtered, and the birds are given their feast. This gruesome image has caused many to wonder at a just, holy God of love. How can a compassionate God do such a thing? Yet such a question forgets that Yahweh is at one and the same time a God of love and a holy God of justice. To ask the question is to ignore the devastating consequences of sin. We must remember the number of times in the book God has offered them forgiveness if they were to repent, yet they again and again refused God’s offer (9:20–21; 14:6–7; 16:8, 10–11) and preferred to worship the very demons who hated them (9:1–21). They preferred the delusion to the truth. It is a holy God who must eradicate sin in order to inaugurate the perfect reality for which he had created humankind in the first place. A powerful

Additional Notes

19:7. Chilton (1987: 473–78) takes the “marriage supper of the Lamb” to be the eucharistic celebration rather than the messianic feast to take place after the eschaton. He believes that the events of chapters 11–18 and 19:11–21 should be understood in preterist fashion as the destruction of Jerusalem, God’s punishment on apostate Israel, and vindication of the church. Thus, the “bride” refers to the establishment of the church as the bride of God and Christ, and the “wedding supper” to the eucharistic celebration that marks the union of the church with Christ. The problem with this view is the apocalyptic tradition regarding the end of the present world order that is certainly behind the imagery of the book. Obviously, a great deal depends on the perspective one adopts regarding the book (see the introduction to this commentary), but the background in Jewish apocalyptic and the images of chapters 11–19, with the beast, the universal imagery of the “peoples, tongues, tribes, and nations” throughout, and the final war, go beyond the limitation of these images to the destruction of Jerusalem and the punishment of apostate Israel. To take the great wedding supper of the lamb as the Eucharist is too narrow in light of the OT background and NT themes that coalesce on this passage as the final celebration that initiates the eschaton.

19:9. οἱ . . . κεκλημένοι: The relationship between “those invited” and “the bride of the Lamb” (19:7) is debated. Some (Walvoord, Thomas) theorize that the bride is the saints from the tribulation, and the guests are the saints who lived earlier, while others (Caird, Beale) believe that the bride is the believers considered corporately (like the woman in 12:1–2), and the guests are the believers considered individually (like the woman’s children in 12:17). I would agree with those (Ladd, Wall) who think both images refer to the church, viewed both corporately and individually.

19:11. Καλούμενος is omitted in A [□]A but is present in 1841 1611 2329 [Ⓜ] et al., though some ([Ⓜ]) place it after πιστός as well as before. Although one could say that its appearance is an assimilation to 19:13 (“called the Word of God”) and 3:14 and that its addition is easier to account for than its omission (so Aune 1998b: 1042), it is better to take it with the UBS committee as an accidental omission and therefore as the original reading (Metzger 1994: 685–86).

19:12. It is difficult to know whether to include ὥς. On the one hand, it is the normal way John states such descriptions and is found in A and several minuscules. On the other hand, it is omitted in [Ⓜ] P 046 051 and even more minuscules. Most likely it should be omitted because it is more probable that later scribes would be influenced by the style of John elsewhere in the book and add it.

19:20. Bauckham (1993b: 210–13) notes two types of final war motifs, one in which the saints play a part (Joel 3:11; Zech. 14:5) and one in which they do not (Isa. 59:16; 63:3). The second builds on the holy wars of Israel in which God alone won the victory (Exod. 14:13–14; 2 Kings 19:32–35; 2 Chron. 20:15–17, 22–24; Isa. 37:33–36) and continues in Jewish literature (Ps. Sol. 17.22–24; 2 Bar. 72.6; Sib. Or. 3.654, 689; 5.418–19). The participation of God’s people in the holy war is especially emphasized in Qumran’s War Scroll (1QM), and in that sense Revelation could be called “a Christian War Scroll.” In a sense, the emphasis on “the overcomer” in Rev. 2:7, 11, 17, 26; 3:5, 12, 21 is an invitation to participate in the final holy war. In 5:5–6 the conquering Ram wins the victory by himself on the cross, but in 7:9–17 the victorious saints seem to have participated. The 144,000 in 14:1–5 who learn the “new song” seem to be victorious in the final war. In conclusion, both types of final war themes occur in the Apocalypse. This passage (19:17–21) belongs to the second type, but the saints who “shatter the nations” in 2:27 and who form part of Christ’s army in 7:14 and 19:14 comprise the first type.

- IV. Final Judgment at the Arrival of the Eschaton (17:1–20:15)
 - A. Destruction of Babylon the Great (17:1–19:5)
 - B. Final Victory: The End of the Evil Empire at the Parousia (19:6–21)
 - C. The Thousand-Year Reign of Christ and Final Destruction of Satan (20:1–10)
 - D. Great White Throne Judgment (20:11–15)

C. The Thousand-Year Reign of Christ and Final Destruction of Satan (20:1–10)

This is easily the best-known portion of the book as well as one of the most divisive passages in the Bible. The OT had little explicit commentary on the “millennium,” but the view of the coming kingdom of God as an earthly reign (e.g., Ps. 72:8–14; Isa. 11:6–9; Zech. 14:5–17) provided the background for the concept of an earthly millennium. The early rabbis drew on this and believed in a preliminary kingdom (see Beasley-Murray 1978: 288, building on Strack-Billerbeck). Combining Deut. 8:3 and Ps. 90:15, Akiba viewed it as a forty-year reign equal to the wilderness wanderings. Another rabbi used Mic. 7:15 and saw a four-hundred-year reign paralleling Israel’s stay in Egypt. Jehuda used Deut. 11:21 and saw it as four thousand years, the same amount of time as from creation to the present. Few issues have divided the church for as long a time as this, for the church in the first three centuries had extensive debates over “chiliasm” (e.g., in the writings of Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Tertullian), the view of a literal “thousand-year” (from the Greek *χίλιος*, *chilias*) reign of Christ. Partly due to an overly materialistic and sensual view adopted by some in the early church (e.g., the Gnostic Cerinthus), leaders began to turn away from such a literal portrait. Due to the nearly universal acceptance of Augustine’s amillennial position, the issue was put to rest for the next twelve hundred years. It reopened with the pietist movement of the 1700s (e.g., Bengel), postmillennialism among the Puritans (Whitby, Edwards), and the dispensational Plymouth Brethren movement of the 1800s.

Since then three positions have often sorely divided Christian groups. To take them in chronological order, premillennialism believes that Christ will return to earth, destroy the evil forces, and reign here for a thousand years. This period will end with the rebellion and final destruction of Satan followed by the final judgment and the beginning of the future age. Amillennialism holds that there will be no literal earthly reign of Christ following the parousia (they say his reign is now, during the church age). Rather, Rev. 20:1–10 is symbolic and describes the situation during the church age between the advents of Christ (so Cruz 1999: 86–87, who calls this a “historical prophetic approach”).[1] Postmillennialism argues that the thousand-year period will be a time of the triumph of the gospel and a period of peace that will precede the second coming of Christ. The issues are complex, and by no means is the solution simple. In this commentary, I take a premillennial approach but recognize the viability of the other two positions. This issue will not be solved until the events take place, and then we will see who is “right.” Until then, we should not fight over these issues but be “iron sharpening iron” as we work together for the kingdom.

Yet the theological debate should not be the primary issue in a study of this passage. Mainly, we must ask how it functions within the book and what it adds theologically to the developing themes of the book. This is part of a much larger section (17:1–20:15) on God’s final judgment of

the forces of evil and the arrival of the eschaton. Chapters 17–18 summarize the judgments on the great prostitute and Babylon the Great, both symbols of the final unholy Roman empire, the reign of the beast. This is finalized in the first half of the hallelujah choruses (19:1–5), praising God for his righteous judgment and vindication of the suffering saints. The second half, 19:6–10, introduces the section on the parousia and praises God for establishing the marriage supper of the Lamb. There the vindication of the saints comes full circle, and they become both the bride of Christ and those invited to the wedding. Here these themes coalesce into a passage on the defeat of the dragon and the vindication of the saints. Whatever millennial view we have, E. Müller (1999: 229–30) correctly identifies the three sections: before the millennium (20:1–3), during it (vv. 4–6), and after it (vv. 7–10).

This passage sums up those themes and several others from the book. First, the judgment of the dragon, anticipated throughout the book, finally occurs. Satan has been seen in all his futility, cast out of heaven (12:7–9), frustrated again and again as he tries to destroy the people of God, imitating everything God does in order to gain some type of supremacy. He is not a figure of power in the book but a figure of deception, and his only triumph is to deceive the ungodly masses into opposing God and worshiping the beast and himself. Therefore, his final defeat occurs in two stages, first in being bound in the abyss for a thousand years (20:1–3), then in being cast into the lake of fire for eternity (20:10). The theme of theodicy in the book also culminates here. The earth-dwellers have again and again rejected every attempt of God to bring them to repentance (9:20–21; 16:8–11), and now many of them are forced to experience the reign of Christ for a thousand years (see below on this) without a devil to deceive them. Yet when he is released, they all flock after him in a millisecond and once again join the rebellion against God. One of the purposes of this passage is to justify the necessity of eternal punishment. This book proves that even the equivalent of fourteen lifetimes (based on the current life expectancy of about seventy years divided into one thousand years) are not enough to overturn their allegiance to Satan. Therefore, the eternal lake of fire is a necessity.

Yet the passage also has a positive thrust as well, finalizing the theme of the vindication of the saints. From 18:20, 24; and 19:2, we know that the evil empire was destroyed in response to the promise of 6:11 that at the proper time God would “avenge the blood” of the martyrs. Here we have the flip side of that theme, as the saints also will “reign with Christ” for the entire millennial period (20:4–6), fulfilling the promise of 2:26–27 that they would be given “authority” and of 3:21 that Christ would give them “the right to sit with me on my throne.” They are “priests of God” (20:6), fulfilling 1:6 and 5:10, serving him as rulers (like Jesus they will become both priests and kings) for the entire period. Rossing (1998b: 264–65) speaks of the historical message to John’s day. He believes this was written to encounter the “realized eschatology” of Rome’s “golden age” that had a millennial triumphalism about it. To Rome’s “already,” John gives his “not yet.” As such John “subverts the present claims of empire with a countervision of a future reign for God’s holy ones” as a bridge from Rome/Babylon to the New Jerusalem.

1. Binding Satan (20:1–3)
2. Thousand-year reign of the saints (20:4–6)
3. Release of Satan and final battle (20:7–10)

¹Then I saw an angel descending from heaven holding the key to the abyss and a large chain in his hand. ²He seized the dragon, the ancient serpent, who is the devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years. ³He threw him into the abyss, then locked and sealed it over him so that he might no longer deceive the nations until the thousand years had been completed. After that he must be released for a short time.

⁴And I saw thrones, and they sat on them, and God gave them judgment. [And I saw] the souls of those who had been beheaded because of their witness about Jesus and because of the word of God, and those who had not worshiped the beast or his image and who had not received his mark on their foreheads or hands. They came to life and reigned with Christ a thousand years. ⁵(The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years had been completed.) This is the first resurrection. ⁶Blessed and holy are those who have a part in the first resurrection. The second death has no power over them, but they will be priests of God and of Christ, and they will reign with him a thousand years.

⁷When the thousand years have been completed, Satan will be released from his prison. ⁸He will go out to deceive the nations that are in the four corners of the world, God and Magog, to gather them for battle, whose number is like the sand of the sea. ⁹They ascended across the breadth of the earth and surrounded the camp of the saints and the beloved city. Then fire descended from heaven and consumed them. ¹⁰The devil that deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and sulfur where also the beast and false prophet were. They will be tormented day and night forever and ever.

1. Binding Satan (20:1–3)

Another *καὶ εἶδον* (*Kai eidon*, Then I saw) begins this section, and it is debated whether this is a chronological indicator (see Mounce 1998: 361 on the “sequence of visions” in the recurring “I saw” of 19:11, 17, 19; 20:1, 4, 12; 21:1). On the basis of its use throughout the book, I conclude that it is not. There is narrative sequence, and the events in the vision flow one after the other, but chronological sequence cannot be proven on the basis of *καὶ εἶδον*. Whether there is chronology between the events of chapters 19–21 (return of Christ—millennial reign—final judgment—new heavens and new earth) is another question. Numbers 1, 3, and 4 are certainly in chronological order, and it seems logical to include the millennium in that chronological list. However, the decision must be made on other grounds, namely the data within 20:1–10.

The first step is the “descent” of an angel from heaven *ἔχοντα τὴν κλεῖν τῆς ἀβύσσου* (*echonta tēn klein tēs abyssou*, holding the key to the abyss). Kraft (1974: 255) identifies the angel somewhat with Christ (who has “the key to Hades” in 1:18) but also recognizes the close parallel to the “star fallen from heaven” in 9:1 who “was given the key to the shaft of the abyss.” There I argued that this may well be the same angel as here in 20:1. In 1:20 we are told that “stars” are angels, and “fall” belongs to the same semantic field as “descend.” Thus, the same angel that unlocked the abyss to release the locust plague in 9:1–2 appears a second time to bind Satan. The difference is that in 9:1–2 he unlocks the abyss (in the narrative it stands open to this present time), while in 20:1–2 he locks it in order to imprison Satan. In a sense the “abyss” is the prison house of demonic spirits (1 Enoch 10.4 [a “hole in the desert”]; 18.14; 2 Pet. 2:4) where they await their final destiny, and the “key” is wielded by the eternal “warden” of the prison. This is the fourth of the “key” passages in the book, after the “keys of Death and Hades” in 1:18, the “key of David” in 3:7, and the “key to the shaft of the abyss” in 9:1. The “key of David” is similar to the “keys of the kingdom of heaven” given the church in Matt. 16:19, referring to an open door to heaven. The other three are closely connected and refer to God’s sovereign control over all demonic powers (see also Beale 1999: 984). Here the angel has not only the “key” but a “chain” in order to bind Satan all the more securely. The purpose of the *ἄλυσιν μεγάλην* (*halysin megalēn*, large chain; probably a manacle to chain the hands to the wall; see Mounce 1998: 361) is to intensify the prison imagery. When Satan is not only thrown in the abyss/prison but shackled inside with a “great chain,” and then the angel “locks” the gates shut, he is not going to escape. The Gadarene demoniac was strong enough (due to demonic influence) to “tear the chains apart” (Mark 5:4), but this chain is too “great” for that, even for the dragon himself. The abyss is his Alcatraz, and God is in complete control.

The angel in 20:2 then ἐκράτησεν (*ekratēsen*, seized; note the switch from the present-tense participles of v. 1 to the aorist in order to stress the action of the angel). The powerlessness of Satan is quite evident. As Michael was able to cast him out of heaven (12:7–9), so this angel has the power to take hold of him and cast him into the dungeon. Then follows a list of his titles that is almost a quotation of the list in 12:9 (see that passage for details). Giesen (1997: 430) notes how this supports the picture of Christ as the messianic judge in 19:11–21. Christ prevails partly because he knows all the names of his adversary. In this context the list of names might almost be official, as if the legal sentence is read to the condemned prisoner as he is being thrown into prison. The dragon is guilty because he is “the ancient serpent,”^[2] Leviathan, who introduced chaos and sin into this world. He is the great adversary, “the devil” or “Satan,” who accuses the people of God day and night (12:10). Therefore, he must be imprisoned. The angel ἔδησεν αὐτὸν (*edēsen auton*, bound him) with the chain in the abyss. This is normal language for arresting (“taking hold of”) a person and taking him away “bound” (cf. Mark 6:17). This verb is found in Jesus’ thesis statement on the “binding” of the demonic realm in Mark 3:27 and parallels: “No one can enter a strong man’s house and carry off his possessions unless he first ties up [‘binds,’ same verb as here] the strong man.” Jesus looked upon his exorcisms as a “binding” of Satan and his entire demonic realm. This passage builds on that tradition (on whether this is the binding that took place during Jesus’ ministry or an event at the end of history, see below). Several (Kraft, Giesen, Aune, Beale) point to Isa. 24:21–22 as background: “In that day the LORD will punish the powers in the heavens above and the kings on the earth below. They will be herded together like prisoners bound in a dungeon; they will be shut up in prison and punished after many days.” This is part of the so-called Little Apocalypse of Isaiah (chaps. 24–27) detailing how God will conquer the world. In Isaiah it is the pantheon of pagan gods that is to be brought down, but in later Judaism this was applied to fallen angels (1 Enoch 10.4–6, 11–13; 13.1–2; 18.12–16; 19.1–2; 2 Enoch 7.1–2; 2 Pet. 2:4).^[3] The period Satan is to be bound is χίλια ἔτη (*chilia etē*, one thousand years). In Jewish apocalyptic there are varying periods of punishment (see excellent discussions in Lohmeyer, Beasley-Murray, Ford, Johnson, and especially Bailey 1934). In 1 Enoch 21.6 it will be ten million years (combining the imprisonment and the fiery punishment), while in 2 Esdr. (4 Ezra) 7:28 it is four hundred years. The rabbis varied from forty to seven thousand years (see the introduction to this section and SB 3:823–27). The idea of a thousand-year period may have stemmed from reflection on Ps. 90:4, “For a thousand years in your sight are like a day that has just gone by” (also behind 2 Pet. 3:8). In some segments of Judaism, history was seen as a “cosmic week” of thousand-year “days,” and thus the seventh “thousand” would be a messianic time of “rest” (Barn. 15; in 2 Enoch 32.1–33.2 [J], it is the eighth “day”). In another twist of this theme, Jub. 23.27–28 says that in the messianic kingdom people will begin to live a thousand years, possibly building on a tradition that Adam died early (930 years) because of his sin. In short, the thousand-year messianic reign is firmly based on Jewish tradition. This leads to a major question as to whether we should consider this to be a literal thousand-year reign (with Walvoord, Hoehner, Thomas) or another instance of symbolic use of numbers (most others; see especially the lengthy response in Beale 1999: 1017–21). A lot depends on earlier decisions regarding the meaning of numbers like 144,000 (7:4) or forty-two months (11:2). If the others are symbolic (as I argued in those passages), then this is probably symbolic as well. Multiples of tens were commonly used in Jewish writings symbolically, and it is likely that this refers to an indefinite but perfect period of time, obviously much longer than the period the Antichrist “reigns” (forty-two months) but still a symbolic period.

After seizing Satan, the angel in 20:3 “threw him into the abyss” (parallel to Satan’s being

“thrown to earth” in 12:9) and both “locked and sealed it over him.” There is clearly great emphasis on the extent to which Satan is “sealed” in his prison, especially since ἐσφράγισεν (*esphragisen*, sealed) is used of the sealing of the 144,000 in 7:3, 4, 5, 8 and for the “sealing” of the message of the seven thunders in 10:4. This intensifies the idea of “locking” the abyss and connotes an absolutely secure situation, guaranteed by sovereign authority. Satan is completely bound in the abyss and cannot escape. S. Thompson (1999: 266) notes three stages to the fall of Satan: the fall from heaven to earth (12:7–9), the fall from earth to the abyss (20:1–3), and the fall into the lake of fire (20:10). The purpose (ἵνα, *hina*, so that) is to ensure that Satan μὴ πλανήσῃ ἔτι τὰ ἔθνη (*mē planēsē eti ta ethnē*, might no longer deceive the nations). In 12:9 the dragon’s primary method is described as “deceiving the whole world” (cf. 20:10), and in 13:14 the purpose of the counterfeit miracles of the false prophet is to “deceive the earth-dwellers.” In 18:23 the merchants used sorcery to “deceive all the nations.” The primary activity of the forces of evil is clearly not to overpower the unsaved but to deceive them. Thus, now Satan is imprisoned in the abyss to stop that activity. It is interesting that there are still “nations” to be deceived in light of 19:19, 21, which say the kings and their armies were destroyed. Yet it is important to realize that it is “the armies” and not “the nations” that are slaughtered. In the narrative (whatever millennial position one holds), there are still “nations” around during the millennium. My view is that these are the earth-dwellers who supported but were not part of the army. They go through the millennium, and it is they who are ruled by the saints on the thrones in 20:4, 6. They then form the group who flock after Satan when he is released (20:7b).

The primary debate here is the extent to which this binding of Satan with respect to the nations is intended. Is this a total or a partial cessation of demonic activity? This is at the heart of the premillennial-amillennial debate. Those who believe that 20:1–10 refers to the period of the church between the advents (e.g., Hendriksen, Hoekema, P. Hughes, Beale) say that the binding is the same as Mark 3:27 (cf. John 12:31; Col. 2:15; 1 Pet. 3:18–19) and refers to the church age. Therefore, Satan is not inactive but rather restricted. He cannot stop the missionary enterprise of God’s people; he can deceive the unsaved but cannot keep them from turning to Jesus if drawn by the Spirit. When God “seals” him, it means God is in control, not Satan. Thus, the devil is curtailed but not powerless. While this view is viable, the language of the text and the theological position of it vis-à-vis the other “deception” passages make this position difficult to uphold. Satan is restricted in this aeon, but only with respect to believers (who are “kept by the power of God,” 1 Pet. 1:5; see my comments on 12:9), not unbelievers. The NT presents his power over this world strongly. He “blinds the minds” of unbelievers (2 Cor. 4:4) and is depicted as “a roaring lion seeking whom he can devour” (1 Pet. 5:8). He “traps” the unwary (1 Tim. 3:7; 2 Tim. 2:26) and is especially “at work in those who are disobedient” (Eph. 2:2). He is the “god of this world” (2 Cor. 4:4), the “prince of this world” (John 12:31), and “the ruler of the kingdom of the air” (Eph. 2:2). The demons are described as “the powers of this dark world” and “the spiritual forces of evil” (Eph. 6:12). It is hard to see how this could describe someone imprisoned so he could not “deceive the nations.” Satan in this age is primarily characterized as the “deceiver,” so 20:3b does not fit the current situation. Rather, it demands a later period after the parousia.^[4]

Here he does not “deceive” again until 20:7–10 when he is released, as stated in the last clause, “until the thousand years had been completed. After that he must be released for a short time.” The divine “must” (δεῖ, *dei*) means God has determined it necessary that he be freed for a final brief period (see the other “musts” of 1:1; 4:1; 10:11; 11:5; 17:10; 22:6). The question is why God would deem this necessary. Since the reason is not specified in the text, no final answer can be given. Yet

it does make sense in light of the theme of theodicy we have noticed throughout (see Osborne 1993). For a thousand years, those among the nations who worshiped the beast will be under Jesus' sovereign control and ruled by the saints. They will not experience Satan or be deceived in any way by him. All they will experience is the benign rule of Jesus himself. Yet after fourteen lifetimes of enforced good (according to the text, i.e., the story form), as soon as Satan is released, they allow themselves to be "deceived" all over again and follow him. The purpose is to prove the power of total depravity and demonstrate once and for all the necessity of eternal punishment. The millennium is the judicial evidence that will convict the earth-dwellers and prove that their eternal sin demands eternal punishment. In other words, 20:3c and 20:7–10 are the divine "must" of a just God.^[5]

2. Thousand-Year Reign of the Saints (20:4–6)

Few verses in the book are more enigmatic than 20:4. A literal translation is: "And I saw thrones, and they sat on them, and judgment was given to them." This statement follows in sequence the binding of Satan in 20:2–3, but who are "they"? The text never states the answer clearly, so there are three options: (1) They could be the heavenly tribunal, with those "sitting on the thrones" the twenty-four elders of 4:4 and 11:16, who sat on thrones and wore white with gold crowns on their heads. (2) They could be the victorious martyrs who now are vindicated (from 6:9–11; 16:6; 18:20, 24; 19:2) and sit on thrones in fulfillment of Christ's promise in Luke 22:29–30 and parallels, "I confer on you a kingdom . . . that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom and sit on thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel." (3) They could be all the saints (building on Luke 22:30; 1 Cor. 6:2), with the martyrs a special group within the larger whole.^[6] As Krodel (1989: 333) brings out, the first would build on Dan. 7:9–10, in which the Ancient of Days sat on his throne and the heavenly court was seated around him with "the books opened." The other two would build on Dan. 7:22a, in which "the Ancient of Days came and pronounced judgment in favor of the saints of the Most High, and the time came when they possessed the kingdom."^[7] Each view is viable, and context must provide the solution. The question is whether 20:4a is separate from verse 4b, or whether they form an interdependent whole. Do we have the celestial elders and then the martyred saints, or are the enthroned ones the martyrs themselves? In light of the ambiguous "they" and the fact that in 20:6 they "reign" with Christ for the whole period, it is possible to see 20:4b as providing the antecedent for the "they" of verse 4a. Also, both the thrones and the "souls" of the martyrs flow from the same "I saw," so the *καί* (*kai*, and) could be seen as epexegetical, "And I saw thrones and those sitting on them . . . namely, the souls." In this way John would be seeing the martyred saints "sitting on thrones."^[8]

Yet there is another way to see the throne imagery. Here the martyrs are described as "souls" as in 6:9, which could be a reference to the intermediate state.^[9] Also, they "come to life" later in the verse and begin their "reign." Thus, many (Ladd, Johnson, Mounce, Thomas) see this as two groups of believers: all the saints (20:4a) and especially the martyrs (20:4b–c) who are exalted to thrones. This is in keeping with 3:21, where all the "overcomers" are promised that Christ would "give [them] the right to sit with me on the throne" (see also 2:26–27; 3:12; 5:10, where all the saints are given this promise). It is difficult to choose between the last two options. The immediate context would favor the first (the martyrs alone on the thrones; so Caird 1966: 252; R. Smith 1998a: 261), while the broad promises of the rest of the book would favor the second (all the saints, especially the martyrs; so Tenney 1954: 143; Wall 1991: 238). The problem is that the grammar of the verse makes the second option difficult to uphold. I believe it is indeed the martyrs who are the

focus throughout 20:4 but that all the saints are also intended in the larger context.

Krodel (1989: 333–34) provides the solution. He agrees that the martyrs are in view throughout 20:4. Since 20:9 mentions “the camp of the saints,” however, this means that all believers are present throughout the millennium. Thus, the martyrs here are representative of “the whole church that resisted compromise, overcame lukewarmness, and persevered in the faith.” In other words, the martyrs are the part embodying the whole, namely, all who have remained faithful to Jesus, not only during this final period of history but throughout the ages. All the saints—those persevering during the OT, NT, church age, and tribulation periods—will be present during this final period of history.

On the thrones,[10] God “gives” (another divine passive ἐδόθη, *edothē*; see 6:2, 4, 8, 11, etc.) them[11] κρίμα (*krima*, judgment). In 1 Cor. 6:2 Paul says, “Do you not know that the saints will judge the world?” As Fee (1987: 233) brings out, the idea of saints judging was a common apocalyptic theme, based perhaps on Dan. 7:22 LXX, “Judgment was given to the saints of the Most High.” Other texts include Wis. 3:7–8: “They shall judge nations and rule over people”; 1QpHab 5.4: “God will judge all the nations by the hand of his elect.” In Matt. 19:28 the twelve were promised that they would “sit on twelve thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel.” Yet the question is what the judgment by the saints means here. Mounce (1998: 364) believes it might follow the Hebrew term מִשְׁפָּט (mišpāt), which means not only “judge” but “rule.” Yet we should not read this as merely an extension of the throne imagery, for kings on the throne did indeed “judge.” Kraft (1974: 256–57) sees a connection of Dan. 7:22 with Dan. 7:9, 26–27 and the activity of the Ancient of Days as judge. In the story line of Rev. 20:1–10, the saints judge the nations under Christ and further control the people who had worshiped the beast and still did not give allegiance to Christ.

The next part of the verse turns specifically to the martyrs and does for them what was done for Satan in 20:2—recite a litany of who they were and what they did for Christ. They had done three things: been beheaded (πεπελεκισμένων, *pepelekismenōn*), refused to worship the beast, and refused to accept the mark of the beast. Aune (1998b: 1086) gives an extended explanation of Roman practice, pointing out that there were two types of execution, the more vindictive form (burnt alive, crucified, or exposed to wild animals), primarily used for foreigners and the lower classes, and decapitation by the sword or an axe, used for upper classes. The highest classes were seldom executed but were usually deported. Since the harsher forms were often used on Christians, “beheaded” is probably a summary term for martyrdom.

The reason (διὰ, *dia*, because of) for their martyrdom goes back to the basic statement of perseverance (1:2, 9), one repeated often in the book (6:9; 12:17; 19:10 [twice], cf. 13:10; 14:12)—“their witness about Jesus [again taking Ἰησοῦ (*Iēsou*, of Jesus) as an objective genitive] and because of the word of God.” As before, this means their faithful witness to Jesus and the gospel message in the midst of terrible persecution that ends in martyrdom. There is a special relationship to 6:9, as many have noted (Schüssler Fiorenza, Lohse, Sweet, Michaels, Giesen, Aune). In both, John sees the souls of those killed because of the word of God and their faithful witness. Thus, their glory and exaltation to thrones are seen as the vindication and reward for their suffering and faithful witness. They have earned the right to sit on Christ’s court[12] and help adjudicate God’s laws during this final period of earthly history. As in Dan. 7:22, God has “judged in favor of the saints,” and they as a result have “possessed the kingdom.” There is some debate regarding the added “who did not worship the beast or receive his mark.” Some believe this is a separate group of believers who also reign with Christ, so that you have the martyrs but also saints who died natural deaths but were still faithful (see Swete, Ladd, Giesen, Beale).[13] While this is

possible, it is unlikely, for there is a close connection between martyrdom and the refusal to participate in the worship of the beast (cf. 13:15–16). The three descriptions here belong together.

The next part is at the heart of the millennial debate. John tells us that *ἔζησαν καὶ ἐβασίλευσαν μετὰ τοῦ Χριστοῦ χίλια ἔτη* (*ezēsan kai ebasileusan meta tou Christou chilia etē*, they came to life and reigned with Christ a thousand years). The meaning of *ἔζησαν* to some extent determines the issue. If it means they were raised bodily from the dead, then this must refer to an event at the end of history. That is certainly the meaning in 20:5: “The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years had been completed.” It is also the meaning in Matt. 9:18 (where the synagogue ruler says if Jesus will touch his dead daughter, she will “come to life”); John 11:25 (“He who believes in me will come to life even though he dies”); and Rom. 14:9 (where “Christ died and came to life”).^[14] In Rev. 1:18 and 2:8 it refers to Christ’s resurrection from the dead, and in 13:14 it is used of the beast “who was killed by the sword and came to life.” Furthermore, in 20:5 this is called “the first resurrection” of the saints (further evidence this is all the saints and not just the martyrs).^[15] Those who hold the amillennial view believe that *ἔζησαν* refers either to the new spiritual life following conversion (Augustine; cf. Col. 3:1; Eph. 2:6, “raised with Christ” as spiritual life now; cf. also P. Hughes 1977: 317) or to the heavenly exaltation of the saints after death in the intermediate state (Hendriksen, P. Hughes, Beale). They argue that “come to life” would fit 2 Cor. 5:1–8 (new life after death) as well as 1 Thess. 4:13–18 (bodily resurrection at the parousia). While this interpretation is certainly possible, the meaning of “came to life” here is part of a much larger picture as to whether 20:1–10 refers to the church age or to a literal reign of Christ with his saints on earth after the events of chapter 19. Moreover, the verb more often refers to physical life and not just spiritual resurrection, and the meaning of “came to life” and “first resurrection” in 20:5–6 (see below) favor a view of bodily resurrection. Thus, throughout the millennial period, the saints will “reign with Christ.” This is another of the primary purposes of the millennium, the vindication and exaltation of those who lost all for the cause of Christ.^[16]

John now tells us in 20:5 that οἱ λοιποὶ τῶν νεκρῶν (*hoi loipoi tōn nekrōn*, the rest of the dead) “did not come to life until the thousand years had been completed.” But who are “the rest of the dead”? If one takes 20:4 as referring only to the martyrs, 20:5 will be all the other saints who have died as well as the unbelievers (so Beckwith, Caird, Mounce, Aune). For those who see 20:4 as referring to all the saints in some way (Ladd, Johnson, Thomas, Beale), however, the “rest of the dead” would be unbelievers. The rest of 20:5–6 as well as the whole of the Apocalypse would support this latter position. The mention of the “first resurrection” in 20:5b would hardly exclude the saints who had not been martyred, and the “second death” in 20:6 would hardly include them. It is best to see 20:5a as a parenthesis addressing the situation of the sinners who have died (as in the NIV, NRSV, NLT). This means that for unbelievers who die, their next conscious moment will be when they face God at the great white throne judgment (the one passage that talks of consciousness for the wicked during this time, Luke 16:19–31, is a parable, and the plot line is local color rather than theological statement).

John now returns to the subject of the exalted saints in 20:4, explaining that their “coming to life” is ἡ ἀνάστασις ἡ πρώτη (*hē anastasis hē prōtē*, the first resurrection). Here and in 20:6 are the only uses of ἀνάστασις in the book. John never names a “second resurrection,” probably because for him it is not a true “resurrection,” which in the NT is normally reserved for believers. What the unbelievers will experience is “the second death” (20:6); John never speaks of a “first death,” possibly because at the moment of death believers continue in eternal life. The resurrection of believers is first both temporally (the unbelievers do not “come to life” until the great white throne

judgment, 20:13) and in degree (first in importance). The nearest parallel would be John 5:29, which speaks of believers “rising to live” and unbelievers “rising to judgment.” There is considerable difference of opinion as to the meaning of “the first resurrection.” Some (Kline 1975; J. Hughes; Beale; see additional note on 20:4–5) see it as death followed by the intermediate state; others (P. Hughes, Chilton) see it as the resurrection of Christ, the basis of the “second resurrection” (the resurrection of saved and unsaved alike); and N. Shepherd (1974: 35–37) believes it is baptism (with the so-called second resurrection the resurrection of the believer at the parousia). Yet there is too little contextual support for the last two views in 20:1–10, for the clear referent would be those in 20:4 who “came to life and reigned with Christ a thousand years.” Thus, it most likely refers to the resurrection of believers. Those who restrict “the first resurrection” to believers differ as to whether it refers only to the resurrection of the martyrs (R. Charles, Walvoord, Kraft, Caird, Mounce) or the raising of all the saints (Johnson, Roloff, Giesen, Wall, Thomas). In light of all that has been said on 20:1–4, the raising of all the saints makes the most sense here.

In 20:6 the fifth beatitude (1:3; 14:13; 16:15; 19:9) addresses the blessed state of those who “share” (ὁ ἔχων μέρος, *ho echōn meros*, who has a part) in the first resurrection. This is the only beatitude in the NT that has a second adjective, ἅγιος (*hagios*, holy). Christ is “holy and true” (3:7; cf. 4:8 and 6:10 on the holiness of God), and the saints share in his holiness in this life (they are called “saints”/“holy ones” in 5:8; 8:3, 4; 11:18; 13:7, 10; 14:12; 16:6; 17:6; 18:20, 24; 19:8; 20:9; 22:21—the most frequent term for believers in the book) but especially will partake of his holiness in the eternal “holy city” (21:2, 10; 22:19), the New Jerusalem. There is another contrast between those who “have a part” in the first resurrection and those who have no “part” in the “holy city” (22:19) but instead have a “part” in the lake of fire (21:8).

John then gives us three characteristics of those who partake of the “first resurrection.” First, ἐπὶ τούτων ὁ δεύτερος θάνατος οὐκ ἔχει ἐξουσίαν (*epi toutōn ho deuterōs thanatos ouk echei exousian*, the second death has no power/authority over them). The “second death” is quite clear in the book. The first death would be physical death in this life, while the second is eternal death in the lake of fire (see 20:14; 21:8). Believers will experience the first but never the second (also 2:10–11, where believers receive “the crown of life” and “will never be hurt by the second death”). In Matt. 10:28 Jesus said, “Do not be afraid of those who kill the body [the first death] . . . [but] of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell [the second death].” In Rev. 6:8 Death and Hades claimed the lives of one-fourth of humankind, but in 20:14 they are thrown into the lake of fire. Death is “the last enemy” but will be destroyed (1 Cor. 15:26, 54–55), and the second death has no “authority” over the Christian. God gave “authority” to Death and Hades in 6:8; to the locusts in 9:3, 10; to the demonic horsemen in 9:19; to the beasts in 13:5, 7, 12; and to the kings in 17:12–13. But that was temporary and earthly power only over the earth-dwellers. While the beast had power to “conquer” and kill the saints, that dealt only with the first death; and as has often been said, that death was the saints’ victory over Satan (12:11). For the saints who faithfully partake of the “holiness” of Christ and persevere, the second death is powerless.

Second, ἔσονται ἱερεῖς τοῦ θεοῦ καὶ τοῦ Χριστοῦ (*esontai hierēis tou theou kai tou Christou*, they will be priests of God and of Christ), continuing the promise from Exod. 19:6 in Rev. 1:6 and 5:10, that the saints have been “made to be a kingdom, priests for [Christ’s] God and Father.” These are the only three passages in the book where ἱερεύς appears, but it is a significant theme in the book. In 7:15 the victorious saints “are before the throne of God and serve him day and night,” a clear priestly activity, and in 22:3 the task of the saints in the New Jerusalem is to “serve” God. Thus, as here, the task of believers in heaven “will be” (note the future ἔσονται here) a priestly one. In

Exod. 19:5–6 Israel would be a “kingdom of priests” only “if you obey me fully and keep my covenant.” This is implicit here as well. The saints throughout are commanded by Christ to remain faithful and obedient to God’s commandments (2:10; 12:17; 13:10; 14:12; 17:14); in 21:8 the “cowardly” (those who do not remain faithful) partake of the second death. The priestly aspect of Exod. 19:6 in the second clause of Rev. 20:6 is followed by the royal aspect (“kingdom of priests”) in the third, as the saints “reign with him a thousand years” (see 20:4d). As Christ is the “priest-king,” so the victorious saints will share in his royal as well as his priestly status. These last two describe the activity of the saints during the millennium as well as in the new heavens and new earth—they will worship God as priests and reign with him as royalty (Krodel 1989: 341; Giesen 1997: 435–36).

3. Release of Satan and Final Battle (20:7–10)

There are five aspects of this scene: the release of Satan, his deception and gathering of the nations for the final battle, their surrounding God’s people, fire descending from heaven to devour the nations, and the casting of Satan into the lake of fire. Again, the modified dualism of the Apocalypse is apparent. These are not equal forces, and the battle once more (like 19:17–21) is virtually a nonevent. God is sovereign and completely triumphant. The episode is built on the Gog and Magog incident of Ezek. 38–39 (see below), the model of the final eschatological war for much of apocalyptic Judaism. This is the second of three stages (19:20–21; 20:10, 14) by which evil is eradicated for all eternity, preparing the way for the “new heavens and new earth” of 21:1–22:5.

John makes clear that Satan is not released until [\[17\]](#) τελεσθῇ τὰ χίλια ἔτη (*telesthē ta chilia etē*, the thousand years have been completed). [\[18\]](#) This is another difficult clause for the amillennial position, since it indicates that Satan’s ability to deceive the nations is not allowed by God until after the period. He is leading the nations astray throughout the period between the advents, while only during this final period is his deceptive work entirely removed. [\[19\]](#) Now the abyss (20:3) is specifically identified as **φυλακή** (*phylakē*, prison), though the imagery of the chains and the lock certainly pointed in that direction. Therefore, his “release” is pictured as the parole of a prisoner. It is difficult at first glance to know why he should be released by God (λυθήσεται, *luthēsetai*, is a divine passive: God will release). [\[20\]](#) In 20:3 his release is treated as a divine “must,” and so it has to be part of the divine plan. On the basis of the rest of 20:7–8, it has to be linked to his deceiving the nations. For the millennial period, he has been rendered powerless and unable to deceive. But now he is pardoned, so he can for a final time deceive the unsaved. Mounce (1998: 371) correctly notes the main purpose: “to make plain that neither the designs of Satan nor the waywardness of the human heart will be altered by the mere passing of time.” As stated on 20:3, this proves the extent of human depravity. Those who were not part of the army and lived through the slaughter of 19:17–21 experienced a millennium with Christ and without the deceptive wiles of the devil. As soon as he is released, however, they forget all the years they have spent with Christ and immediately flock after Satan. Their depravity is in complete control, and so eternal punishment is the only valid option.

As soon as he is released (20:8), Satan ἐξελεύσεται (*exeleusetai*, will go out) from his prison in the same way (with the same verb) that the first two horsemen “went out” to make war in 6:2, 4 and the locusts “went out” in 9:3. His purpose is twofold, to “deceive the nations” and to “gather them for battle” (parallel infinitives). Revelation emphasizes strongly that Satan does not overpower people but rather deceives them. The ἐξουσία (power/authority) of Satan and his minions both comes from God and is controlled by God (6:8; 9:3; 13:5, 7; 16:8; 17:12), and the δύναμις (*dynamis*, power) of Satan (13:2; 17:13; 18:3) is entirely earthly and finite compared with the overwhelming

power of Lord God Almighty (1:16; 4:11; 5:12; 7:12; 11:17; 12:10; 15:8; 19:1). Therefore, Satan will go out *πλανῆσαι* (*planēsai*, to deceive; though only the verb is used in Revelation to stress the activity of Satan) to achieve his ends, either through false teachers in the church (2:20) or through “leading the nations astray” (12:9; 13:14; 18:23; 19:20; 20:3, 8, 10). As Mounce (1998: 372) points out, it is very possible that the second infinitive (*συναγαγεῖν*, *synagagein*, to gather) modifies the first infinitive rather than paralleling it (only a few manuscripts [051 ² □^A sy] have *καί* between the two infinitives); thus, Satan “deceives the nations *in order to* gather them for battle.” The nations are gathered from “the four corners of the world,” the same phrase as used in 7:1 (“the four angels standing at the four corners of the earth”) to emphasize that his followers came from every part of the world (drawn from the OT; cf. Isa. 11:12; Ezek. 7:2). The army itself is not only drawn from all over the world, but their “number is like the sand of the sea.” This image is common in the OT for an uncountably huge number (e.g., 2 Sam. 17:11; Job 29:18; Ps. 78:27; Isa. 10:22), often for a huge army (e.g., Josh. 11:4; 1 Sam. 13:5).

The nations are now further identified as “Gog and Magog,” referring to Ezek. 38–39, where Gog (the king of the northern lands) and “Magog” (meaning “the land of Gog”) come to wage war against the people of God. There is an interesting order in Ezekiel that parallels Rev. 20. After the nation is resurrected and reconstituted (the “valley of dry bones” in Ezek. 36 = Rev. 20:4–6), the coalition of nations comes to destroy them (Gog and Magog, Ezek. 38 = Rev. 20:7–9a) yet are destroyed themselves (Ezek. 39 = Rev. 20:9b–14), and then the glorified people of God enjoy the eschatological temple (Ezek. 40–48 = Rev. 21:1–22:5). It is unlikely that the whole of chapters 20–22 are patterned after Ezekiel, for the details do not parallel Ezekiel closely enough. There is a general relationship, however, and it is likely that John was thinking of Ezekiel along with several others like Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Daniel as he wrote.

Here the relationship with Gog and Magog is primary, and John saw 20:7–10 as a fulfillment of that prophecy. The prophecy looks to the king of a northern land, Gog, who decides to invade the “peaceful and unsuspecting people” of Israel (Ezek. 38:11) to plunder their land. They will establish a coalition of “many nations” (38:5–6) to invade with “a mighty army” (38:15–16). Yet God is in control and allows all this so that “the nations may know” that God is indeed Yahweh (38:16, 23; 39:6–7, 22, 28). This becomes an eschatological war, as seen in the “after many days”/“in future years” of 38:8 and the “shaking of the heavens” imagery of 38:18–23. Thus, God’s purpose is to destroy the coalition of nations and to restore his people so that all will recognize that he is God (39:25–29). Jewish writers developed this prophecy. Some used it geographically to describe the Ethiopians (Sib. Or. 3.319) or Scythians (Josephus, *Ant.* 1.6.1 §123), while others interpreted it messianically to depict the final war (Tg. Ps.-J. on Exod. 40:11; 3 Enoch 45.5).

The vision here interprets Gog and Magog as symbols of all the nations gathered together in opposition to Christ and his followers. Gog is aligned with the beast in chapter 19 and with Satan in chapter 20. Block (1998: 492–93) describes well the transformation of the Ezekiel vision in Revelation:

An event whose timing in the original prophecy is only vaguely set “in the latter days” is now identified as the penultimate event in human history; the picture of national peace and tranquility is transformed into a portrait of universal peace; the foreign foe becomes a satanic and diabolical force; the divine victory is placed in the hands of the Messiah. The message that had originally been presented to the Jewish exiles to bolster their sagging hopes has been transformed into a message of hope for all Christians.

Block sees five theological motifs: Yahweh is the “unrivaled lord of human history”; his reputation is connected to the welfare of his people; he is faithful to his covenant; he is the God of grace and

mercy; and the experience of that grace by the believer is humbling. I would add that for the unbeliever Yahweh is a God of wrath and justice. He is sovereign, and those who arrogantly repudiate his mercy cannot escape. This passage is proof of that fact.

While 20:3 (“so that he might no longer deceive the nations”) and 4 (“came to life”) are problematic for the amillennial position, 20:8b is problematic for the premillennial position. The statement that Satan deceives the nations συναγαγεῖν αὐτοὺς εἰς τὸν πόλεμον (*synagagein autous eis ton polemon*, to gather them for battle) is taken verbatim from 16:14, “to gather them for battle on the great day of God Almighty.” This has led many scholars (Morris, Hendriksen, P. Hughes, Beale) to assert that 16:14 and 20:8 are speaking of the same battle, and that 20:1–10 is cyclical and reiterating the same final battle of Armageddon as 16:14–16 and 19:17–21 (called the “recapitulation theory.” Therefore, 16:14–16; 19:11–21; and 20:1–10 portray the same event [see White 1989]). Beale (1999: 1022), for instance, sees the articular τὸν πόλεμον in 16:14; 19:19; and 20:8 as anaphoric, referring back to the anarthrous πόλεμον in 11:7 (the beast making war against the two witnesses), the first mention of the final battle. All four references then refer to the same final battle. Aune (1998b: 1095) notes four other options: (1) Gog and Magog are a demonic army (Schüssler Fiorenza, Lohse, Roloff, Kraft, Sweet); (2) they represent all the rest of the dead who are resurrected and judged (Mealy 1992: 140–42); (3) the destruction of 19:17–21 refers only to the army, while that in 20:7–10 includes the rest of the world (Beasley-Murray 1978: 297); (4) this is mythical language, so we do not have to insist on narrative logic (Roloff 1993: 228). There is no evidence to support a demonic army, for these are the “nations,” and there is little to connect it with the rest of the dead in 20:5. The best alternative is the third, which would fit closely the interpretation employed thus far. By this reasoning, the use of the same phrase as 16:14 would make this a second battle like the other. The battle of 16:14–16 and 19:17–21 was led by the beast, this one by Satan. The army of the first was destroyed by the sword from the mouth of the Lord, this army by fire coming down from heaven. At the end of that battle, the beast and false prophet are cast into the lake of fire; after this one, Satan himself is cast into the lake of fire. In other words, the details are sufficiently different to warrant the view of a second battle rather than a recapitulation of the first.

The huge army of those who had lived through the millennium and then been immediately seduced once more by Satan now in 20:9 ἀνέβησαν (*anebēsan*, ascended—reverting from the futures of 20:8 back to the normal aorists used in the visions), the same verb used for the beast “ascending” to make war (11:7) and the beasts “ascending” (13:1, 11; 17:8). Aune (1998b: 1096–97) notes that the verb is frequently used of a military attack (Judg. 12:3; 1 Sam. 7:7; Isa. 36:10), in particular the final eschatological war (1 Enoch 56.6). Τὸ πλάτος τῆς γῆς (*to platos tēs gēs*, the breadth of the earth) adds to the imagery of the “four corners” to mean the armies came from everywhere to attack the saints. In keeping with ancient military strategy, the satanic army then “surrounds” and lays siege to the saints in “the beloved city,” Jerusalem. Again the scene is symbolic, since all the saints would hardly fit in the actual Jerusalem. In Luke 21:20 Jesus predicted, “When you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, you will know that its desolation is near,” a prophecy of the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 but also a likely allusion in this verse.

Calling Jerusalem “the beloved city” recalls the times Zion is called the city God loves (Ps. 78:68; 87:2; 122:6; 132:12–14; Jer. 11:15; Zeph. 3:17). This is a switch from Rev. 11:8, which equates Jerusalem, as representing the apostate nation, with Sodom and Gomorrah and with Rome/Babylon. As a result, some (Beasley-Murray 1978: 298; Giesen 1997: 437) identify this with the New Jerusalem of Rev. 21:10. During the millennium, it has been reinstated as the capital of

Christ's kingdom. In the reconstituted holy city, the people of God have formed τὴν παρεμβολὴν τῶν ἁγίων (*tēn parembolēn tōn hagion*, the camp of the saints). This is most likely a reference to the camps of the twelve tribes around the tabernacle during the wilderness wanderings (Exod. 33:7–11; Num. 2:1–34), and it was in the camps that the Shekinah shone forth (Exod. 14:19–20, the first place “camp” is used) and the presence of God was experienced (Deut. 23:14). The image of the “camp” could be military (it was used of Roman “camps”) but more likely is ecclesiological; the saints are the wandering people of God who have now found a home and are protected by God even from a vast invading army (cf. Ezek. 38:9 for the invasion and 38:18–23 for the deliverance). Giesen (1997: 437) also sees a parallel with the war scroll of Qumran (1QM 3.5; 4.9), which centers on the end-time battle of the sons of light against the sons of darkness. Here in Revelation the task of the saints is not to take the battle into their own hands but to encamp before the Lord and trust him.

As in Rev. 19:17–21, the enemy comes to do battle, but there is no battle. Now κατέβη πῦρ ἐκ τοῦ οὐρανοῦ (*katebē pyr ek tou ouranou*, fire descended from heaven) and “consumed them.” This “descent” is the divine response to the “ascending” of satanic activity at the beginning of this verse. In 13:13 the false prophet counterfeited Elijah's miracle and made “fire descend from heaven to earth,” but that was merely a public event. Here God sends fire from heaven, and as in 2 Kings 1:10, 12 it consumes the soldiers sent to oppose his will. This also parallels the fire sent down upon the forces of Gog and Magog (Ezek. 38:22; 39:6). In Rev. 11:5 the two witnesses spewed “fire from their mouths and devoured” anyone who tried to harm them. This is the final step above that, as all the enemies of God are devoured by fire.

After the armies have been destroyed by fire, God turns his attention in 20:10 to his primary adversary, ὁ διάβολος (*ho diabolos*, the devil). This is the Greek interpretation of the Hebrew loanword ὁ Σατανᾶς (*ho Satanas*, Satan) used in 20:2, 7 (see 12:9, where they are side by side). The word order here reverses that in 19:20–21, where the beast and false prophet were thrown into the lake of fire before the army was killed. It is surprising how often Satan's activity in “deceiving” the nations is mentioned in the book and particularly in this passage (12:9; 13:14; 18:23; 19:20; 20:3, 8, 10); it is clear that this deception is a major reason for his judgment here. Again the big issue is whether this (along with 20:13–14) recapitulates the same event as 19:20–21 or whether there are to be three stages in which the beast and false prophet, then Satan, and finally the unbelievers are cast into the lake of fire. On the basis of the reasoning stated throughout 20:1–10, it is better to view these as separate events rather than the same event.^[21] There is a distinct progression throughout chapters 19–22, from the return of Christ to the millennium to the final judgment and finally to the descent of the new heavens and new earth. The recapitulation theory does not do justice to this progression and to the difference of details at each level.

Thus, like the beast and false prophet, the devil is now “thrown into the lake of fire and sulfur.” The false trinity is now together in eternal punishment in the same way they worked together to oppose God and his people. Kraft (1974: 259) sees an allusion here to the divine judgment on Gog in Ezek. 38:22, “I will pour down torrents of rain, hailstones, and burning sulfur on him.” If so, that punishment would be transformed here into eternal torment. This is an event guaranteed by God, and Satan as well as his followers are well aware that their defeat is inevitable. In Matt. 8:29 the demons asked Jesus, “Have you come here to torment us before the appointed time?” This is an obvious reference to the eternal “torment” (the same term as in Matt. 8:29) that is described here. In 2 Pet. 2:4 we are told that fallen angels are “in gloomy dungeons to be held for judgment,” and in Rev. 12:12 the devil is “filled with wrath because he knows his time is short.” Satan's great defeat was not at this final battle but at the cross (see 5:5–6). Therefore, while he is indeed “a roaring lion

looking for someone to devour” (1 Pet. 5:8), he is at the same time an already defeated foe. In the lake of fire Satan, the beast, and the false prophet **βασανισθήσονται ἡμέρας καὶ νυκτὸς εἰς τοὺς αἰῶνας τῶν αἰώνων** (*basanisthēsontai hēmeras kai nyktos eis tous aiōnas tōn aiōnōn*, will be tormented day and night forever and ever). This language is a collage of phrases used to describe the fate of those who follow the beast in 14:10–11: “tormented in fire and sulfur . . . and the smoke of their torment is going to ascend forever and ever. . . . no rest day and night.” The one who seduced the nations into worshiping him must suffer the same penalty they do—eternal, conscious punishment in the lake of fire. The pairing of “day and night” with “forever and ever” emphasizes this with great rhetorical power.

This is another passage that makes it difficult to accept the belief of some (see additional note on 14:11) who say the fate of the wicked is “annihilation” (they will simply cease to exist). The picture here is too detailed to mean anything other than eternal punishment. One of the themes of the book is the depths of human depravity. Sin is eternal, so its consequences are also eternal. After a thousand years of experiencing Christ, the unbelieving nations throw themselves after Satan the first chance they get. The message is that in a billion years, a trillion years, they would do the same! Thus, they must suffer the same penalty as the one they worship, namely, eternal torment (see on 20:13–15 below).

Summary and Contextualization

This chapter is difficult primarily because of the debate over chiliasm/the millennium that has consumed far too much energy down through the centuries. Since there is only one passage in Scripture that directly teaches it and since the arguments of the sides are almost equally valid, there should not be the type of rigidity we too often see attached to this issue. Nevertheless, I believe the data point more to a premillennial stance, since that does more justice to the natural flow of the text (from return of Christ to millennium to final judgment to new heavens and new earth) and provides a better interpretation of “so he could not deceive the nations” (20:3) and “come to life” (20:4–5).

Yet whatever one’s position, certain themes stand out in the narrative. In 20:1–3 it is the sovereignty of God and the futility of Satan. As in 12:7–9, God does not need to get directly involved in defeating Satan. It takes only an angel under divine authority to collar Satan and throw him in prison. The whole Bible has looked forward to this moment, from the serpent in Eden and Leviathan the great dragon to the dragon in this book. Yet the final defeat comes in two stages, for God has deemed it “necessary” (20:3b) that Satan first be imprisoned for a thousand years and then be released. The reason is the second major theme, the deception of the nations. For that period, the equivalent of fourteen lifetimes, the nations who lived through Armageddon could not be deceived.

The second part (20:4–6) stresses another major theme of the book, the vindication of the saints. In Matt. 19:28 Jesus promised the disciples they would sit on “twelve thrones judging the twelve tribes.” In 1 Cor. 6:2 Paul says the saints “will judge the world.” Then in Rev. 2:26 the saints will have “authority over the nations,” and in 3:21 they “will sit with [Christ] on his throne.” This prepares for 6:9–11, where the martyred saints are promised that at the proper time they would be vindicated. That vindication took place in stages, from the storm theophany of 6:12–17 to the outpouring of wrath in 8:3–5 to the destruction of Babylon the Great in chapters 17–19. But it is finalized in 20:4–6, where the saints sit on thrones and judge the nations for the

thousand-year period. In 20:5–6 the contrast between saint and sinner comes to the fore, and this has strong evangelistic potential. Every non-Christian must be aware that only believers will experience the “first resurrection.” For the unbelievers the only “resurrection” they will experience will be the one that leads to the “second death,” but that will have no “power” over the Christian. The believer will know only “life,” but the unbeliever will have only eternal “death.”

God allows Satan and his followers to have one last gasp, yet the purpose there is to prove beyond any doubt that the hold of depravity over the sinner is total. Though the nations have had a thousand years to experience the benign authority of Christ, as soon as Satan is released they flock after him. This tells the reader that God’s only response must be eternal punishment. The power of sin is eternal over those who have rejected Christ again and again, as seen in the repeated repudiations of God’s offer of repentance throughout this book (9:20–21; 16:9, 11), culminating in the final refusal after experiencing the reign of Christ for a thousand years. So God can respond to eternal sin only with eternal torment. Thus, as the enemies of God and the saints surround his people, he sends fire from heaven to devour them as a prelude to the eternal fire that will be their destiny.

At that time Satan joins the other two members of the false trinity (19:20) in the lake of fire, where their followers will soon join them. God’s justice demands this response. Those who are offended by such teaching have too low a realization of the terrible nature of sin and the natural response that divine holiness must have toward it. We must remember the many times in this book that God sought their repentance, and those who did repent (11:13) no longer faced such judgment. But God cannot abide sin, and his reaction must be swift and final.

Additional Notes

20:4. ἐβασίλευσαν: Aune (1998b: 1104–8) provides an excellent excursus on “the temporary and the eternal kingdom,” showing reasons for interpreting this verse as referring to an earthly millennial kingdom. Following Schweitzer, he believes it is an interim or transitional kingdom that furnishes a synthesis combining characteristics of both this age and the age to come, so providing a natural movement from the one to the other (perhaps reflecting 1 Cor. 15:20–28). Several Jewish apocalyptic texts are similar. Some are possible but somewhat ambiguous (2 Enoch 32.2–33.1; Jub. 1.27–29; 23.26–31), but three others are more clear. In the Apocalypse of Weeks (1 Enoch 91.11–17; 93.3–10), history is presented as ten weeks, with the eighth a temporary earthly kingdom, the ninth a time of final judgment, and the tenth an eternal earthly kingdom. In 2 Esdr. (4 Ezra) 7:26–44 and 12:31–34 there are seven days of silence and then the final judgment (7:26–44), but there will be a period of joy for the righteous remnant before the end arrives (12:31–34). In 2 Baruch there will be “twelve waves of tribulation” (27.1–15) followed by a period of great abundance in which the elect will be joined by the righteous dead (29.3–30.5). Then will come the final defeat of the world rulers, and the eternal kingdom will begin (chaps. 39–40). The temporary earthly kingdom (74.2) is described as a time of peace and joy with sickness and fear vanishing (73.1–2).

20:4–5. ἔζησαν: Beale (1999: 1003–17) makes an extensive argument for understanding “come to life” and “the rest of the dead” in terms not of physical resurrection but of spiritual resurrection. He recognizes that ἀνάστασις in the NT normally refers to a physical resurrection (except for Luke 2:34; John 11:25) but asserts that both terms (“resurrection” and “come to life”) are used interchangeably for both spiritual and physical resurrection in the same context, as in Rom. 6:4–13 (“Christ raised . . . walk in newness of life”; cf. also Rom. 8:10–11; John 5:24–29). Beale follows Kline (1975) closely, who argues that since the “second death” of unbelievers is spiritual while the “first death” (implied in 20:4) of believers is physical, it follows that the “first resurrection” of believers can be spiritual while the “second resurrection” of unbelievers (implied in 20:5) is physical. Beale then argues that this is in keeping with the old and new creations of 21:1 and the emphasis in 21:4–8 on physical death versus spiritual death. Moreover, “first-second” (e.g., “first/last Adam” in 1 Cor. 15:22, 42–49) and “old-new” (e.g., the covenants in Heb. 8:6–10:9) contrasts elsewhere do not demand the contrast of things that are “identical in kind,” so it follows that the two resurrections here can also be different kinds. There is abundant evidence for linking the intermediate state with language of “life” and “coming to life,” such as the “crown of life” in Rev. 2:10–11, God as the “God of the living” in Luke 20:37–38, and “judged by the flesh/live by the Spirit” in 1 Pet. 4:6. Therefore, Beale believes that the language of “come to life” in Rev. 20:4d refers to a translation of the believer at death into a spiritual resurrection, that is, the intermediate state.

He has done an excellent job of defusing the argument of many that “come to life” could not possibly mean spiritual resurrection in 20:4 and physical resurrection in 20:5. But has he proven this view correct? While the arguments are well presented and viable, I do not find them compelling. The “second death” of 20:6 is both physical and spiritual; one cannot restrict it to the spiritual element, for it is called “torment” in 14:10–11 and 20:10. Moreover, while the switch from a spiritual resurrection in 20:4 to a physical one in 20:5 is possible, it is not probable on the basis of the normal use of the term, and there are no contextual indicators to support such an interpretation. Furthermore, the issue must be decided on the whole of 20:1–10, not just the meaning of *ἐζήσαν* in 20:4–5. The whole passage thus far would indicate that Satan is chained and sealed in the abyss so he cannot “deceive the nations,” a statement that does not fit Satan’s activity in the present world. It is better to see 20:1–10 as a future event and not as a present reality (see also Webb 1994). In light of this, it is still more viable to see the “coming to life” in 20:4–5 as physical resurrections at the parousia (believers) and last judgment (unbelievers). In other words, Beale’s arguments are possible but not probable.

- IV. Final Judgment at the Arrival of the Eschaton (17:1–20:15)
 - A. Destruction of Babylon the Great (17:1–19:5)
 - B. Final Victory: The End of the Evil Empire at the Parousia (19:6–21)
 - C. The Thousand-Year Reign of Christ and Final Destruction of Satan (20:1–10)
 - D. Great White Throne Judgment (20:11–15)

D. Great White Throne Judgment (20:11–15)

The next natural event after the casting of Satan into eternal perdition is the judging of his followers, but I contend that this judgment is more universal, beginning with the saints and then finishing with the sinners (see below), in keeping with 1 Pet. 4:17, “It is time for judgment to begin with the family of God; and if it begins with us, what will the outcome be for those who do not obey the gospel of God?” That was speaking in an inaugurated sense of present judgment leading to final judgment, but the theme leads naturally to what we see here. It is the just end of human history, tainted as it is with depravity, for God to conclude this era by judging sin and sinners. The eternal age cannot begin until sin is eradicated, and that occurs here. As Beale (1999: 1039) points out, both the last judgment (20:11) and the coming of the new heavens and new earth (21:1) begin with the passing away of the old heavens and old earth, so it is natural to assume that they are simultaneous events. The old order ends as the new order arrives.

1. Great white throne (20:11)
2. Judgment of the righteous (20:12)
3. Judgment of sinners (20:13–15)

Exegesis and Exposition

¹¹Then I saw a great white throne and one seated on it. The earth and sky fled from his face, and there was no place found for them. ¹²And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne. Books were opened, and another book was opened, the book of life, and the dead were judged from what was written in the book according to their deeds. ¹³Then the sea gave up its dead, and Death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them, and each of them was judged according to their deeds. ¹⁴Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. ¹⁵If anyone was not found written in the book of life, they were thrown into the lake of fire.

1. Great White Throne (20:11)

All are agreed that this will occur at the end of history. After the characteristic “Then I saw” to indicate a new part of the vision, John introduces a scene reminiscent of 4:2, where John passed through the “open door in heaven” and saw “a throne located in heaven, and someone sitting on it.” There it was the majesty of God on his throne, but now the scene is that of the judge on his throne, probably God in light of the throne imagery throughout; but since Christ “stands in the center of the throne” in 5:6, it could well picture both on the throne (cf. 22:1, where it is “the throne of God and of the Lamb”). Beasley-Murray (1978: 299) has an excellent discussion of the Synoptic imagery behind this, in which Jesus is the witness before God at the last judgment (Matt. 10:32–33; Mark 8:38), as well as of John 5:22, 30, where God has given judgment to the Son. In the

NT God is judge in Matt. 6:4; 18:35; Rom. 14:10; and Christ is judge in Matt. 7:22–23; 25:31–46; 2 Cor. 5:10. John is not interested in labeling the one on the throne, and it is likely he intends both Father and Son to be involved in the judgment.

This is the only throne in the book described with further adjectives, *θρόνον μέγαν λευκόν* (*thronon megan leukon*, a great white throne). In the book *μέγαν* is usually used for something large or loud (a “loud voice,” “great tribulation,” a “huge sword”), so this refers both to the immensity and to the majesty of the throne itself, possibly to set it apart from the “thrones” of 20:4. It is “white” to sum up the themes of purity and holiness that have been associated with it throughout the book. Christ has white hair (1:14), sits on a white cloud (14:14), and returns on a white horse (19:11); celestial beings wear white (4:4); the triumphant saints wear white (3:4, 5; 6:11; 7:9, 13) and return with Christ on white horses (19:14). The “white throne” sums up all these themes (this is the last appearance of “white” in the book). It is a throne of purity and triumph and so rightly stands as the throne of judgment. Moyise (1995: 54, building on R. Charles) believes this builds on the Ancient of Days on his throne in Dan. 7:9, 10, 22.

Before the new age can begin, this age must cease. Isaiah 51:6 states, “The heavens will vanish like smoke, the earth will wear out like a garment” (also 13:10, 13; 34:4; Ps. 102:26; Ezek. 32:7–8; Joel 2:10). Romans 8:18–22 speaks of “the whole creation groaning” due to its “bondage to decay” and its deep desire to be “liberated” from it. Second Pet. 3:7, 10 tell how this liberation must occur: “The earth and everything in it will be laid bare . . . and the heavens will disappear with a roar.” The “decay” that now holds creation in bondage must be destroyed in order for creation to join God’s children in the “new heavens and new earth” (contra Giesen 1997: 446, who sees this as not so much “cosmic catastrophe” as a metaphor for the overwhelming grandeur of God as judge). Thus, John now tells us that “earth and sky ἔφυγεν [*ephygen*, fled] from his face” and adds: “There was no place found for them.” The idea of “fleeing from the face of God” pictures judgment and goes back to the tradition behind 2 Pet. 3. Moses could not look on the face of God and live (Exod. 33:20), and creation likewise must flee his presence. The idea is similar to Rev. 16:20, where “every island fled and the mountains could not be found” (also 6:14) in the shaking of the heavens at the seventh bowl judgment. Both in 16:20 and here, total destruction is connoted. The second statement, *τόπος οὐχ εὑρέθη αὐτοῖς* (*topos ouch heurethē autois*, no place was found for them) is nearly identical with 12:8, which states “no place was found” in heaven for Satan and the fallen angels. Like 12:8, this draws on Dan. 2:35 (Theodotion), which describes the annihilation of the four wicked kingdoms. Thus, it too is a picture of destruction. The results of this are found in Rev. 21:1: the new heaven and new earth were able to descend “because the first heaven and the first earth have passed away.”

2. Judgment of the Righteous (20:12)

It is difficult to decide whether the whole of 20:12–14 refers only to the unsaved or whether 20:12 is the saved and 20:13–14 are the unsaved. In favor of verse 12 being the righteous would be that they are “standing before the throne” similar to the victorious saints “standing before the throne” in 7:9 (also 5:6, where the Lamb “stands in the midst of the throne”) as well as the opening of the book of life here but not in 20:13. This would be even more likely if Dan. 12:1–2 is behind the verse; there the book is opened, and “everyone whose name is found written in the book will be delivered . . . to everlasting life.” Revelation 20:12 would reflect the positive side of Dan. 12:1–2, and Rev. 20:15 would reflect the negative side. Against such a reading would be that they “came to life” in 20:4, while this describes them as “the dead, great and small,”^[1] and so the “dead” in 20:12 and 20:13

together would be “the rest of the dead” in 20:5. However, the mention of the “dead” in 20:12 could be meant to parallel the “dead” in 20:13 (that the “sea” gave them up would fit this theory since the sea is a symbol of evil in the Apocalypse), with both 20:12 and 20:13 referring to those who had experienced earthly death. By this theory the “dead” of 20:12 would be those who “came to life” in 20:4, and the “dead” in 20:13 would be “the rest of the dead” in 20:5. There is a close parallel with 14:14–20 and the judgment depicted there. Those who opt for identifying the grain harvest as the righteous and the grape harvest as the unrighteous in 14:14–20 (Lohmeyer, Ford, Bauckham) *could* also choose a similar theory here (though, for the most part, they do not do so). Those who see a single judgment there would do so here (Hendriksen, Morris, Roloff, Michaels, Aune, Beale). I believe 14:14–15 and 20:12–13 are intertwined, and so 20:12 describes the judgment of the righteous dead and 20:13–15 the judgment of the unrighteous dead. This would fit the “book of life” and imagery of Dan. 12:1–2 in Rev. 20:12 and that the “sea” (the place of evil that also gave up the beast in 13:1) only gives up its dead in 20:13.

At this time βιβλία ἠνοίχθησαν (*biblia ēnoichthēsan*, books were opened), an allusion to Dan. 7:10, where “the books were opened” at the heavenly council with the “Ancient of Days” on his throne. In Jewish writings these were the books recording the deeds of both the righteous and the unrighteous (Esth. 6:1–3; Isa. 4:3; Mal. 3:16; 1 Enoch 90.20; 2 Esdr. [4 Ezra] 6:20). Thus, as a result of these books, the righteous “dead were judged from what was written in the books according to their deeds.” The theme of judgment by works has been used in Revelation for both the saved (2:23; 11:18b; 14:13; 22:12) and the unsaved (11:18a; 18:6; 20:13), and it is a major teaching throughout Scripture and Jewish writings (see on 14:13). This is the basic juridical principle (*lex talionis*, the law of retribution) of the OT, the Roman world, and of this book: what we do to others, God will do to us. For believers the theme is simple: we are saved by grace but will be judged by works. There are many other NT passages on the judgment of believers “according to their works” (Matt. 16:27; Rom. 14:12; 1 Cor. 3:12–15; 2 Cor. 5:10; 1 Pet. 1:17). The Bible never says what exactly this “judgment” will be, and we know that we have been forgiven for our sins and will be rewarded for our service to God. It must suffice to say that we will be faced with our evil deeds and then forgiven and will be rewarded for the good we have done. But we will have to face what we have done, the bad as well as the good; there is simply too much material in the NT on the believer “judged by works” to ignore.

At the same time, “the book of life” is opened, and as in Dan. 12:1–2 the righteous will be “delivered” and have “everlasting life.” The “book of life” is usually stressed negatively (those blotted out [3:5] or not found in it [13:8; 17:8; 20:15]) but also refers to those whose names were written in it (21:27). As in the ancient world, it is built on the roll of citizens in a city or nation; thus, those written in it are citizens of heaven and God’s special people.

3. Judgment of Sinners (20:13–15)

The “sea” and “Death and Hades” are virtual synonyms in the book, both personifications of the realm of evil. The sea personifies evil in 12:12 and 13:1; and Death and Hades are personified in 1:18; 6:8; 20:13–14. In mentioning the “sea” here, there is another incongruity (like “came to life” and “dead” in 20:4, 12), because the heavens and earth have been destroyed in 20:11, and the sea is specifically said to be gone in 21:1, yet the sea now gives up its dead.^[2] But such tensions are part of apocalyptic imagery. Aune (1998b: 1102) calls it an instance of *hysteron-proteron*, the reversal of the logical order of events. With the dead coming to life to face final judgment, we have the “second resurrection” implied in 20:5a. As with the righteous in 20:12, so “each” (note the

emphasis on the individual) of the unrighteous is “judged according to their deeds.” That sinners do good works as well as bad, just like saints, has given rise to a belief in some circles of “degrees of punishment” for the unsaved to parallel the “degrees of reward” for the saved, as in Milton’s *Paradise Lost*. This is an interesting possibility but cannot be affirmed due to the absence of evidence in Scripture.

After the judgment of the unrighteous, the evil forces join the false trinity in the lake of fire (20:14) by two further stages. First, personified “Death and Hades are thrown into the lake of fire.” There are several options: (1) This describes what Paul taught in 1 Cor. 15:26, “The last enemy to be destroyed is death” (also 1 Cor. 15:54–55; Isa. 25:8; Hos. 13:14). Ultimately, this must mean physical death, for Rev. 20:14b identifies the lake of fire as “the second death.” According to 21:4, in the new heavens and new earth “there will be no more death” (so Lohmeyer, Beasley-Murray, Kraft, Johnson, Schüssler Fiorenza, Krodel, Mounce, Thomas, Michaels, Giesen). (2) Death and Hades are symbols for demonic forces, and so the demonic realm is rendered powerless (so Swete, Morris, Caird, Roloff, Wall). (3) They could be a metonymy (the name of the container standing for its contents), referring to the unbelievers who are cast into perdition, and thus synonymous with 20:15 (Beale, Aune). (4) They could symbolize physical death in the sense that it is now swallowed up and superceded by the “second death,” eternal torment (also Beale 1999: 1035). While all four could be correct, the first two are the more likely, for Death and Hades throughout the book are personified as malignant forces, and the presence of “death” and the “second death” fits the idea behind 1 Cor. 15:26 too well. The added note that “the lake of fire is the second death” clarifies the statement in 20:6, “The second death has no more power over them.” Now explicitly it is defined as “the lake of fire” (for background and meaning, see on 19:19–21). Death and Hades join the false trinity in eternal torment (19:20; 20:10) and complete the stages by which God eradicates evil for all eternity. The second death is not death in the same way as physical earthly death, that is, the cessation of earthly existence. There is no cessation here but rather ongoing conscious punishment.

The final stage (20:15) in God’s ending the age of sin is the casting of unbelievers into the lake of fire. Earlier they were described as those who “worship the beast and receive his mark on their foreheads” (14:9; 19:20) but here they are those whose names “were not found written in the book of life” (also 17:8). The first description was the basis for the second, moving from what they did to its consequence. The idea of fiery judgment occurs in Dan. 7:9–11 (the beast “thrown into the blazing fire”) and Isa. 66:24 (“their fire will not be quenched”) and is frequent in intertestamental writings (1 Enoch 27.1–2; 48.9; 54.1; 90.24–27; 108.3–4; 2 Enoch 10.2; Sib. Or. 2.196–209) and in the teachings of Jesus (Mark 9:43–48; Matt. 3:12; 24:51). This is another instance in which there is no answer regarding how literal the metaphor is intended to be. The background study in Rev. 19:20 shows how closely linked the idea of fiery judgment is to Israel’s own history, so it could be an earthly analogy of a heavenly reality (namely eternal torment) in the same way as the temple imagery in 21:9–27 and the Garden of Eden imagery in 22:1–5 could describe in earthly terms a future heavenly reality. As in all the symbolism of the book, we will have to wait and see what is literal and what is metaphorical.

This text has been the subject of a constant debate over predestination and free will. Did God foreordain those whose names were not written in the book of life, or did it result from their conscious choices to reject God’s call? In this book (and in the larger theological arena), it is not an either-or. The conscious rejection of God’s call to repentance by the earth-dwellers is a major theme in the book (9:20–21; 16:9, 11; 20:7–8; cf. 14:6–7), and the sovereignty of God is the

overarching single theme of Revelation. The two—the will of humans and the elect will of God—function together here. The unrighteous were judged “according to their deeds” (20:13) and then cast into the lake of fire by the sovereign judge. Also, 13:8 further describes the book as “the book of life belonging to the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world,” meaning that its basis was the sacrificial atonement of the Lamb; and 12:11 says that the believers conquered the dragon “by the blood of the Lamb.” Thus the contrast is complete: both the saved and the unsaved have responded to the call of God and the sacrifice of the Lamb, and that has determined their destinies. The saved escape the second death and head into an eternity of bliss (see 21:1–22:5), while the unsaved, on the basis of their choices and the judgment of a sovereign God, head into eternal torment.

Summary and Contextualization

The great white throne judgment flows naturally from the millennial period as the necessary response to the unmasking of terrible evil. Yet the white throne does not judge only the sinners, for the saints must face God as well and be “judged according to their deeds” (20:12). The difference is that their final destiny is life; and while they will be faced with all they have done, whether good or bad (1 Cor. 3:12–15; 2 Cor. 5:10), the final results will be forgiveness and reward. For the sinners (Rev. 20:13–15), the result is tragically and completely the opposite. They too will be “judged according to their deeds,” but their destiny is the lake of fire, because they have rejected God’s call and their names are not recorded in the book of life. Unbelievers reading this must realize the significance of rejection. They will follow Death and Hades into the lake of fire and share the eternal torment of the false trinity (14:10–11; 20:10). No matter how metaphorical this might be, the thought is awful to contemplate. If heaven is many degrees greater than the portrait in 21:1–22:5, then eternal damnation is also many degrees worse than the portrait here.

- I. Prologue (1:1–8)
- II. Churches Addressed (1:9–3:22)
- III. God in Majesty and Judgment (4:1–16:21)
- IV. Final Judgment at the Arrival of the Eschaton (17:1–20:15)
- V. New Heaven and New Earth (21:1–22:5)
- VI. Epilogue (22:6–21)

V. New Heaven and New Earth (21:1–22:5)

Not just the Book of Revelation but the whole Bible has pointed to this moment. Since Adam and Eve lost their place in Paradise and sin reigned on earth (Rom. 5:12–21), the divine plan has prepared for the moment when sin would finally be eradicated and the original purpose of God when he created humankind could come to pass. Every stage of the Apocalypse, from the earthly woes of the seven churches to the three judgment septets to the destruction of the great prostitute/Babylon the Great to the final events of this aeon (return of Christ/millennium/final judgment), the goal has been the “new heaven and new earth.” It is especially connected to the letters to the seven churches, for many of the promises given to the “overcomers” (2:7, 11, 17, 26–28; 3:5, 12, 21) are fulfilled in this vision of the “new heaven and new earth.” Hemer (1986: 16) says that the perfection of the heavenly Jerusalem is set in implicit contrast to the imperfections of the seven cities in chapters 2–3. At the same time, the visions here provide the realization of all the hopes and dreams of the people of God from time immemorial. Many of those hopes have been tainted by sin (e.g., material prosperity, status, or pleasure in this life), but what they represented could only be truly fulfilled in heavenly prosperity and joy. Indeed, the reigning on thrones during the millennium (whatever position one takes on that issue) is merely a harbinger of the greater reality of the New Jerusalem. That is one of the primary purposes of that temporal and earthly kingdom, to provide a foretaste of the far greater glory awaiting us. Giesen (1997: 450) calls this John’s great finale with his magnificent portrait of the new reality that will conclude God’s plan of salvation.

Those whose names were not written in the book of life were cast into the lake of fire. Those whose names were written in the book of life became the bride of Christ and the inhabitants that made up the New Jerusalem (21:9–10). In 1 Pet. 1:12 we are told “the angels desire to look into these things,” namely God’s plan of salvation being worked out in the lives and suffering of the saints. The angels’ interest is all the more intense with regard to this event, since it means the cessation of the suffering of the saints (21:4, 27; 22:3–5). Most of all, eternity means basking in the presence of God. Moses could not look on the face of God and live (Exod. 33:20), and God mediated his presence to Israel via the Shekinah (from Hebrew שָׁכַן, *šākan*, to dwell), the pillar and cloud during the exodus, and God’s presence above the ark in the Holy of Holies. That place was so sacred that no one could enter except the high priest, and then only once a year on the Day of Atonement as he represented the nation. In the New Jerusalem, “the dwelling [= Shekinah] of God is with his people” (Rev. 21:3), the fulfillment of all the longings of the saints down through the centuries. Boring (1989: 219) says this is one of the reasons the final destiny of the saints is a city: “A city is the realization of human community, the concrete living out of interdependence as the essential nature of human life . . . for the city as a whole is the community of believers, the temple in which God dwells.” We are one with one another and with God.

This section is organized like chapters 12–13, with a thesis paragraph (21:1–6, with 7–8 a parenetic challenge to the readers in light of the vision) that is then expanded in two directions, first viewing the Holy City as an eternal Holy of Holies (21:9–27) and then as a new Eden (22:1–5). Throughout this John pulls material from OT images, especially from Isaiah and Ezekiel, to show how the prophets have prepared for this day. Like the OT counterparts, this passage also views heaven as an earthly reality. The Holy City descends out of heaven to earth, and the new Eden is also apparently in the “new earth.” It is difficult once again to know how literally to take this vision. We are not told how the new heaven and the new earth relate to one another nor how we are to relate to the two new realities. As in so many other instances in the book, we will have to wait and see. The one thing we do know, however, is that the New Jerusalem is the reality that finalizes the hopes of God’s people and rewards them for all they have endured. It also is intended to spur the readers to greater faithfulness in the present, knowing what is at stake. Will we be “overcomers” or “cowards” (21:7–8)? That will determine whether we are part of the New Jerusalem.

V. New Heaven and New Earth (21:1–22:5)

► A. Coming of New Heaven and New Earth (21:1–8)

B. New Jerusalem as the Holy of Holies (21:9–27)

C. New Jerusalem as the Final Eden (22:1–5)

A. Coming of New Heaven and New Earth (21:1–8)

This is a transition passage similar to the hallelujah choruses of 19:1–10. Deutsch (1987: 109, 111) says this is both the conclusion to the seven visions of 19:11–21:8 and an introduction to 21:9–22:5. It bridges the heavenly and the earthly, and the two become one. At the literary level, it is the last segment of a series of καὶ εἶδον (*kaieidon*, and I saw; cf. 19:11, 17, 19; 20:1, 4, 11, 12; 21:1) passages, thus concluding the series of events (parousia, Armageddon, millennium, final judgment, arrival of the new heaven and new earth) that constitute the eschaton. At the thematic level, it introduces the final major segment of the book, the vision of the eternal state. Because it fits so closely with what follows, I have placed the thematic over the literary in my outline (see also 21:12 for a similar decision). In this section John introduces us to the basic vision, the arrival of the new heaven and new earth and the descent of the New Jerusalem (21:1–2), and then the voice from the throne tells us the significance of this, namely, the fulfillment of all the OT hopes and the removal of all suffering of God’s people (21:3–4). After this God speaks directly in six parts:[1] (1) The time of newness has arrived (21:5a); (2) the truthfulness of this teaching (21:5b); (3) God has finished his work (21:6a); (4) God is still sovereign over history (21:6b); (5) the thirsty are promised the water of life (21:6c); and (6) the readers must decide whether to be overcomers or cowards (21:7–8). Thus, 21:1–8 has the dual purpose of concluding 19:11–21:8 and introducing 21:1–22:5.

1. Basic vision (21:1–2)
2. The voice from the throne confirms its significance (21:3–4)
3. God speaks and describes new heavenly order (21:5–6)
4. Challenge to overcome, not be a coward (21:7–8)

Exegesis and Exposition

¹And I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and first earth have passed away, and there is no longer any sea.

²Then I saw the Holy City, the New Jerusalem, descending out of heaven from God, prepared like a bride adorned for her husband.

³And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Behold, the dwelling of God is with humankind. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people. He will be with them as their God. ⁴He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and there will no longer be any death or mourning or crying or pain, for the former things have passed away.”

⁵Then the one seated on the throne said, “Behold, I am making all things new.” Then he said, “Write, because these words are faithful and true.” ⁶Then he told me, “These events are over. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. To the one who thirsts I will give from the spring of the water of life freely. ⁷The one who overcomes will inherit these things, and I will be God to each of them, and they will be my children. ⁸But as for cowards, unbelievers, abominable people, murderers, the immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all who lie, they will have their part in the lake of burning fire and sulfur, which is the second death.”

1. Basic Vision (21:1–2)

Isaiah concludes his prophecy by promising that God would make “a new heaven and new earth” that will “endure” (65:17; 66:22; see Aune 1998b: 116 on John’s possible independent translation of the MT here). This was picked up in 2 Pet. 3:13, where the fiery destruction of the old heaven and earth would lead to a “new heaven and new earth.”^[2] As Wu (1995: 119–22; cf. Fekkes 1994: 227–29) brings out, Isa. 65:17–18 builds distinctly on the creation account.^[3] In Gen. 1:1, “God created the heavens and the earth,” while in Isa. 65:17 God will create (with בָּרָא, *bārā* / create, used three times in 65:17–18 versus once in the creation account) the heavens and earth “anew.” If sin had not entered the world, the first creation would have sufficed. Since it was “in bondage to decay” due to sin (Rom. 8:21), however, it had to be replaced. The primary themes in Isa. 65:17–22 are joy (both God’s and his people’s) and the removal of sorrow and suffering. God’s joy is never mentioned in Gen. 1–3, so his joy over his new heaven and new earth is all the more remarkable. These Isaianic themes of joy and newness dominate John’s portrayal as well. This is only the first of many Isaianic allusions in this section. As Wu (1995: 243) says, John in Rev. 21:1–8 builds “clouds of clusters tied to Isaiah.”

There is a major contrast between καινός and πρῶτος (*kainos, prōtos*, new, first), with καινός emphasizing more qualitative newness than temporal newness (so Johnson 1981: 592; Beale 1999: 1040). There will be a whole new reality, a new kind of existence in which all the negatives of the “first” (Gen. 1) world will be removed, all the discoloration by sin will be gone. There was considerable speculation regarding this new order in Jewish thinking. Two ideas predominated, one holding that there would be total destruction of the present world and virtually a creation de novo of a new heaven and earth (1 Enoch 72.1; 83.3–4; 91.16; 2 Bar. 44.12; Sib. Or. 3.75–90) and the other teaching a renovated or transfigured earth (Jub. 1.29; 4.26; 23.18; 1 Enoch 45.4–5; 2 Bar. 32.2–6; 57.1–3; T. Levi 18.5–10). Second Pet. 3:13; Rev. 20:11; and 21:1 follow the first tradition, as the old heaven and earth ἀπῆλθαν (*apēlthan*, have passed away—another prophetic aorist), echoing Mark 13:31 (“Heaven and earth will pass away”; cf. Matt. 5:18 par.; Luke 16:17; 1 Cor. 7:31; Heb. 12:27; 1 John 2:17). God will create a new order and a new world.^[4] It is difficult to know whether there will be a type of physicality in the eternal order similar to this world. On the basis of the emphasis on a physical resurrection in Luke 24:39; Rom. 8:11; and Phil. 3:21 and on a “new earth” here, some degree of carryover may be indicated. At the same time, however, Paul speaks of being “raised in glory” and of a “spiritual body” (1 Cor. 15:43–44), so we know little of what form that will take. It is best to affirm some type of continuity within the wholly “new” order. Moreover, the idea of a “new heaven and new earth” also hints that the old dichotomy between the “first heaven” and the “first earth” will be no more. God will now dwell in the New Jerusalem, and heaven will be brought down to earth. In Rev. 7:9–17 the saints will spend eternity in heaven, while in 21:9–22:5 they will spend eternity in the New Jerusalem and the final Eden. In other words, heaven and earth will be united into a larger reality (see also the summary and contextualization below).

The added thought that “the sea is no more” has occasioned some comment. It seems out of place and unnecessary in light of heaven and earth “passing away.” The answer is found in the symbolic meaning of the “sea” in the Apocalypse. Giesen (1997: 452) notes the link between “sea” and “Death and Hades” in the judgment of 20:11–15. Both are hostile to God and humanity. Beale (1999: 1042) lists five uses of the concept in this book: (1) the origin of evil (12:18; 13:1); (2) the nations that persecute the saints (12:18; 13:1; 17:1–6); (3) the place of the dead (20:13); (4) the location of the world’s idolatrous trade activity (18:10–19); and (5) a body of water, part of this world (5:13; 7:1–4; 8:8–9; 10:2, 5–6, 8; 14:7; 16:3). He believes all five are related to this, but it is likely that the first two predominate. The sea as a symbol of evil would best explain why it is added

here.[5] In the new order, not only will the old creation be gone, but evil will “be no more.” The false trinity and the nations that caused so much suffering will have been cast into the lake of fire, so temptation and pain will be gone forever.[6]

When the new heaven and new earth are in place, then τὴν πόλιν τὴν ἁγίαν Ἱερουσαλὴμ καινὴν (*tēn polin tēn hagian Ierousalēm kainēn*, the Holy City, the New Jerusalem) can “descend” (21:2). Uncharacteristically, this phrase is placed between καί (*kai*, and) and εἶδον (*eidon*, I saw) for emphasis. Rissi (1972: 55–56) notes that the historical Jerusalem had first of all “profaned itself” by crucifying the Lord (11:7) and opposing the two witnesses (11:2). In 11:8 it was linked with Babylon/Rome and called “the great city” because it had become apostate due to unbelief. But now it is once more the “Holy City” and has become “the New Jerusalem,” the heavenly city of the saints. Räßle (1996) brings out the strong contrast between the cities of the book (the past—Babylon; the present—the seven cities and Rome) with the future city of God in eternity. The phrase “New Jerusalem” occurs only in 3:12 and 21:2 in the Bible, but the concept has a broad history. Behind this are several passages from Isaiah, Ezekiel, and Zechariah. Park (1995: 71–86) sees a pattern in Isaiah in which a new and glorified Jerusalem will be the center of the world in the last days (Isa. 2:1–5; 18:7), and Yahweh will come to Zion as Redeemer (59:20) after destroying the apostate earthly Jerusalem (24:10–13; 25:2) and reigning on Mount Zion (24:23). At that time her “wilderness will be like Eden” (51:3), and Zion will “put on [her] garments of splendor” and be “Jerusalem, the holy city” (52:1). Finally, in the “new heavens and new earth,” God will “create Jerusalem to be a delight and its people a joy” (65:18). In Ezekiel there is the promised “new exodus” in which the land will be like the Garden of Eden (Ezek. 36:35; cf. 47:11–12), and God’s sanctuary will be set in the midst of his people “for evermore. My dwelling place shall be with them; and I will their God, and they shall be my people” (Ezek. 37:26–27 = Rev. 21:3). In Ezek. 40–48 the name Jerusalem is not used, and the city is renamed “Yahweh is there” (48:35). In this restored city there will be twelve gates representing the twelve tribes (40:5–43 = Rev. 21:12–13). In Zechariah the New Jerusalem becomes the “City of Truth” (Zech. 8:3) to which the nations come in pilgrimage (8:20–23) when Yahweh returns and dwells there. After Yahweh destroys the rebellious nations and delivers his people (12:1–9; 14:1–7), Yahweh will come, “living water will flow out of Jerusalem” (14:8), and there “will be no more curse” (14:11 = Rev. 22:3).

This was continued in the intertestamental writings (see Park 1995: 87–106). In 1 Enoch 90.28–29, God would “transform” the “ancient house” (Jerusalem) and build “a new house, greater and loftier than the first one.” Jubilees 4.26 speaks of “Mount Zion, which will be sanctified in the new creation for the sanctification of the earth.” Second Esdr. (4 Ezra) 10:25–49 speaks of a preexistent heavenly city with great foundations prepared according to God’s specifications. According to T. Dan 5.12, “The saints shall refresh themselves in Eden; the righteous shall rejoice in the new Jerusalem, which shall be eternally for the glorification of God.” In Sib. Or. 5.418–21, God destroys the cities of the nations and makes his city “more brilliant than stars and sun and moon.”

Two NT passages also provide evidence for this theme, Gal. 4:26 on “the Jerusalem that is above” and Heb. 12:22 on “the heavenly Jerusalem.” In Galatians Paul contrasts the Jewish system (“the Jerusalem that is now”) with the Christian way that is linked with the eschatological reality of the future Jerusalem. In Hebrews the author contrasts the earthly Sinai with the heavenly Zion (12:18–24), also speaking in an inaugurated sense of the present relationship with Christ as a proleptic anticipation of the eternal, heavenly reality to come. In addition, Phil. 3:20 (cf. Eph. 2:19) says the believers are “citizens” of heaven, and Heb. 11:10 speaks of “the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God” (cf. 11:16; 13:14).

Thus, the descent of the “New Jerusalem” from heaven here is the fulfillment of a prophetic expectation with a rich history. The **καταβαίνουσιν** (*katabainousan*, descending) of the New Jerusalem frames (3:12; 21:2, 10) the many “descents” by which God has brought history to a close in the book (10:1; 16:21; 18:1; 20:1, 9). When the divine power “descends” from heaven to earth, his sovereignty reigns over the affairs of humankind. Moreover, in this last descent, heaven and earth are finally united. After 21:2, 10 there is never again any “from heaven to earth,” for in the new heaven and new earth they are one. Revelation places considerable emphasis on the heavenly temple (7:15; 11:19; 14:15, 17; 15:5–6, 8; 16:1, 17). Now the heavenly temple descends from heaven to earth in the form of a city and becomes the eternal home of the saints.

In its beauty and joy, the city is **ὡς νύμφην κεκοσμημένην τῷ ἀνδρὶ**^[7] **αὐτῆς** (*hōs nymphēn kekosmēmenēn tō andri autēs*, like a bride adorned for her husband). In 19:7–8 the church is the bride of the Lamb, and her “adornment” is her “righteous deeds.” In 21:18–21 the adornment fits the normal picture of precious stones worn by the bride. Here the Holy City is “like a bride,” possibly echoing Isa. 54:5–6, where Zion is the wife of Yahweh who has been brought back by her husband’s love and rebuilt with precious stones (Isa. 54:11–12; cf. Rev. 21:19–21). In Isa. 61:10 God clothes Israel “with garments of salvation . . . as a bride adorns herself with jewels”; and in 62:1–5 Zion is given “a new name” (= Rev. 3:12) and Yahweh will rejoice “as a bridegroom rejoices over his bride.”

There is a debate about the connection between the city and the saints. Is the New Jerusalem the place in which the saints reside, or is it a symbol of the saints themselves? Thüsing (1968) says it is not so much a place as the perfected people themselves, and Gundry (1987: 256) argues strongly that “John is not describing the eternal dwelling place of the saints; he is describing them and them alone.” Thus, it describes their future state rather than their future home (see also Draper 1988: 42). Mounce (1998: 382) connects this with 1 Cor. 3:16–17, where the believers are the temple of God; here they are the city of God, visualizing “the church in its perfected and eternal state.” Yet while it is possible that John transformed the Jewish tradition of an end-time New Jerusalem into a symbol of the people themselves, that is not required by the text. In Deutsch’s study of the transformation of the images in this text, she concludes (1987: 124) that John chose this as a contrast to the evil city of Babylon the Great in order to comfort the afflicted with the promise of the future blessing. Babylon was both a people and a place, and that is the better answer here. It is a people in 21:9–10, when the angel shows John the New Jerusalem as “the bride, the wife of the Lamb,” and in 21:13–14, when the twelve tribes and twelve apostles are the gates and the foundations of the city. But it is a place in 21:3 where God “dwells” with his people, in 21:7–8 where the readers either “inherit” it or face the lake of fire, and in 21:24, 26 where the glory of the nations are brought into it. In short, it represents heaven as both the saints who inhabit it and their dwelling place.

2. The Voice from the Throne Confirms Its Significance (21:3–4)

An unidentified “loud voice from the throne” (it cannot be God, as he speaks in 21:5–6, so it is probably an angel bearing God’s message) now interprets the significance of the heavenly city for the believers. Again, motifs drawn from the OT predominate. Indeed, the covenant established in Sinai is now fulfilled, as seen in the Holiness Code of Lev. 26:11–12, “I will put my dwelling place among you . . . I will walk among you and be your God, and you will be my people.” This promise was repeated often (Exod. 29:45; Jer. 31:33; Ezek. 37:27 [probably the verse behind the wording here]; 43:7–9; Zech. 2:11; 8:8)^[8] as a note of comfort for God’s beleaguered people. **Ἰδοὺ** (*Idou*, Behold) is a call to pay especially close attention (see on 1:7). The first part of the promise, **ἡ σκηνὴ**

ΤΟΥ ΘΕΟΥ (*hē skēnē tou theou*, the dwelling of God), is a virtual translation of “Shekinah,” typified in the cloud and pillar of fire at the exodus and symbolized in both the tabernacle (often translated with σκηνή in the LXX) and the temple. Most of all, Shekinah meant communion between God and his people, and it was finalized in two stages, first when “the Word became flesh and tabernacled (σκηνώω) among us” (John 1:14), and second here as the Shekinah “dwells with his people.” In Christ the Shekinah became incarnate, and here communion between God and his people becomes physical and absolute, as God σκηνώσει μετ’ αὐτῶν (*skēnōsei met’ autōn*, will dwell with them—the verb cognate of “dwelling” above). As in 19:7–8, the verbs in 21:3–4 switch to future tenses, probably to draw attention to the prophetic overtones of these critical portions. God will no longer dwell high and lifted up above his people but will now “tabernacle” in their midst.

The rest of the verse expands this basic idea: “They will be his people. He will be with them as their God.” All the other OT and NT passages use the singular λαός (*laos*, people); John alone has the plural λαοί, indicating all the peoples of the world, in keeping with the frequent emphasis of the book on all the “peoples” of the world (5:9; 7:9; 10:11; 11:9; 13:7; 14:6; 17:15).^[9] In eternity all ethnic and racial distinctions will disappear, and we will be one. This may reflect the new covenant passage of Jer. 31:33b (= Heb. 8:10c), “I will be their God, and they will be my people” (also Jer. 7:23; 11:4). That promise was fulfilled partially in the new covenant of Jesus and finally in the New Jerusalem. It is also reflected in 2 Cor. 6:16b, which supports Paul’s contention that “we are the temple of the living God” (v. 16a): “As God has said, ‘I will live with them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they will be my people.’” Paul saw that covenant promise fulfilled in Christianity, but now we see the final and eternal fulfillment as God’s people begin actually to live with him. One could even say that this is the theme of the whole of Rev. 21:1–22:5 (so Aune 1998b: 1124, who follows Schüssler Fiorenza). It is only in the eternal reality that we will know this completely and finally. While certainly every clause is true today as well (as indeed Paul and Hebrews say above), we know them spiritually, while in the final age we will know them in terms of final physical reality.

After the eternal covenant is presented, the benefits belonging to the saints who form and inhabit the new heaven and new earth are presented (21:4). They center on the peace and joy God will give his people. First, God ἐξαλείψει πᾶν δάκρυον (*exaleipsei pan dakryon*, will wipe away every tear) from their eyes; this reproduces 7:17, which looked back to Isa. 25:8 (cf. 30:19; 35:10; 51:11; 65:19). In fact, Rev. 7:15–17 directly anticipated this passage, saying that the victorious saints would stand “before the throne of God and serve him day and night,” as God removed all hunger and thirst as well as the heat of the sun; and as the lamb shepherded them to “springs of living water . . . God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.” These are more the tears of suffering and sacrifice than tears of regret; in Isa. 25:8 it follows “he will swallow up death forever,” and 35:10 and 51:11 have the formula “sorrow and sighing will flee away.”

Second, God will remove the sources of sorrow—“death or mourning or crying or pain.” There will be everlasting joy and bliss, for the debilitating effects of sin and suffering have been taken away. Every reader of this commentary should think of all they have gone through, all the illness and suffering and loss and incredible sorrows that are always part of life in this sin-sick world. Not only does creation “groan” in the midst of its infirmities, but we also “groan inwardly as we await our adoption as God’s children, the redemption of our bodies” (Rom. 8:22–23). John is now describing that time when the “redemption of our bodies” will have been accomplished.^[10] Isaiah also pointed forward to this: “everlasting joy will crown their heads. Gladness and joy will overtake them, and sorrow and sighing will flee away” (51:11; 65:19). This is the universal hope that has

comforted the saints down through the ages. Death was the primary stepchild of sin (Rom. 5:12; James 1:15), and it is always presented in Scripture as a malignant force tormenting humankind. But Death, the last enemy, has itself been destroyed (1 Cor. 15:26; Rev. 20:14), and all its precursors (mourning, crying, and pain) have gone with it.

The concluding thought ties it all together: this has occurred because τὰ πρῶτα ἀπῆλθαν (*ta prōta apēlthan*, the former things have passed away), a quotation of 21:1 (“the first heaven and the first earth have passed away”). All these things (death, mourning, crying, pain) were part of “the first world” and have no place in the “new world.” In a sense, 21:1–4 is framed with this wondrous truth; the new eternal reality has occurred because God has caused all the former things to “pass away.” This also sums up all the promises given the overcomers in the seven letters (2:7b, 11b, 17b, 26–28; 3:5, 12, 21). They all relate to promises that will come to pass when this world has ended and eternity has begun. This is also the thrust of the “heroes of the faith” in Heb. 11. Their faith was at all times related to “a city with eternal foundations, a city designed and built by God” (11:10 NLT), leading them to look for “a better place, a heavenly homeland” (11:16 NLT).

3. God Speaks and Describes New Heavenly Order (21:5–6)

In 21:3 a voice came from the throne, but now “the one seated on the throne” speaks for the first time (directly stated, so Stuhlmacher 1968: 3) since 1:8 (he probably spoke in 16:1 and 16:17 and possibly in 10:4; 14:13; 18:4, but all were described as “a voice from heaven” or “from the throne”). As several have noted (Beasley-Murray, Sweet, Park), the Yahweh speech here has the effect of ratifying not only the content of 21:1–4 but perhaps all the visions of the book since they have pointed to this moment. There are five different elements in this divine speech to the church (six if one counts 21:7–8), and it is best to take them one at a time.

1. God’s message begins with a second (with 21:3) call for serious attention (“Behold”). His first comment sums up the primary theme of 21:1–4, **καὶνὰ ποίῳ πάντα** (*kainā poiō panta*, I am making all things new). Stuhlmacher (1968: 13–15) calls this the centerpiece of 21:5–8. As such it both encourages the faithful regarding God’s power and trustworthiness, and warns the weak about spiritual failure. The switch to the present tense after the aorists of 21:1–3a and the futures of 3b–4 is emphatic. As Beale (1999: 1053) notes, it is a prophetic present guaranteeing for the reader God’s future re-creation of the heavens and earth. It is important to realize that the speech of 21:5–8 is not just God’s speaking in the future but his addressing the church in the present. **Ποιέω** is used often in Revelation for God’s activity in creation (14:7) and redemption (1:6; 3:12; 5:10); here God is “making” a “new” creation. This is the fourth time (of nine in the book) that **καινός**, is used in 21:1–4 (see vv. 1 [twice] and 2) and frames the basic vision with an emphasis on the “new” creation. There is a difference of opinion as to whether this “new” creation means renovation of the old order (so Swete; Ford; Sweet; Wall; Harrington; Heide 1997: 43–44; Aune) or replacement with an entirely new order (so R. Charles, Walvoord, Beasley-Murray, E. Müller, Roloff, Krodel, Giesen, Mounce). As said above, there is both continuity (it is a new “earth”) and discontinuity between the old and the new, but primarily the old was totally destroyed (as in 20:11; 21:1), and the new is a replacement. God’s statement alludes to Isa. 43:19a, “See, I am doing a new thing,” and 65:17, “Behold, I will create new heavens and a new earth. The former things will not be remembered, nor will they come to mind.” Rissi (1972: 58) believes that John “relates the ‘former troubles’ of the Isaiah text to the suffering in 21:4.” The Isaiah allusion also supports the above theory of replacement. The old will be gone forever. Stuhlmacher (1968: 5–6) traces the development of the Isaianic theme in Jesus’ teaching: the kingdom has entered this world *now*, but there is still a

future, coming kingdom (e.g., “your kingdom come” in Matt. 6:10). The renewal of the present order will be universal. Paul uses the Isaiah passages (so Beale 1999: 1052; Aune 1998b: 1125) to describe the Christian life in 2 Cor. 5:17, “If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come.” There is an inaugurated sense in this: the Christian is now a “new creation” and as such is a harbinger of the final “new creation” that will take place at the eschaton.

2. Once more (as in 1:11, 19; the letters to the seven churches; 14:13; 19:9) John is told to “write” down a direct message for the church. As in 1:11, 19, the command here probably does not relate just to this particular message (so Beckwith, Kraft, Prigent, Mounce, Aune) but to the whole book, since οὗτοι οἱ λόγοι (*houtoi hoilogoi*, these words) connotes the message of the entire work. This is the second of three statements regarding the truthfulness of the prophecies (22:6 quotes this word for word, 19:9 has “these are the true words of God”). The other two are said by an angel, this one by God himself. The purpose is to help the reader understand the truthfulness and importance of the message. This is not the product of just another of the many soothsayers and oracles in the Roman Empire but comes from God himself. The idea of the message as πιστοί (*pistoi*, faithful) builds on all the passages dealing with Christ’s “faithfulness” (1:5; 3:14) and that of the believers (2:10, 13; 17:14). These words can be trusted because they are ἀληθινοί (*alēthinoi*, true), a term also used of Christ (3:7, 14; 19:11) and God (6:10; 15:3; 16:7; 19:2). God’s message partakes of his truthfulness. Beale (1999: 1053) points out that in Isa. 65:16–17 it is the “God of truth” who “creates new heavens and a new earth.” In other words, the new creation is certain because the “faithful and true” God has guaranteed it.

3. At the pouring of the seventh bowl (Rev. 16:17), a voice from the throne exclaimed, Γέγοναν (*Gegonan*, They are over), pointing forward to this moment when God would finalize the events of the eschaton set in motion at the seventh bowl by repeating the message, “They are finished.” The perfect tense stresses a state of affairs resulting from an action (see on 16:17), so this means salvation history is at an end and the future age can begin. Rissi (1972: 58) says that the plural points to the λόγοι of 21:5, the “words” of the prophecies of the whole book. There are in a sense three stages: At the cross Jesus said, “It is finished” (John 19:30), meaning God’s redemptive plan for his sacrificial death. Then in Rev. 16:17 the voice from the throne said, “It is over,”^[11] meaning that the events of the eschaton ending this present evil order are finished (cf. 10:6; 11:15, 18; 12:10; 15:1). Finally, God here says “They are over,” meaning that all the events of world history—including the world’s destruction and the inauguration of the final new age—are at an end.

4. All of this is anchored in the character of God as sovereign over history. God’s title, “Alpha and Omega,” as interpreted in “the Beginning and the End,” occurs also in 1:8, further interpreted as “the First and the Last” in 1:17; 2:8), and all three are applied by Christ to himself in 22:13. As Park (1995: 171, following Bauckham 1993a: 27) points out, the title occurs at the beginning (1:8) and end (21:6; 22:13) of the visions, thus framing the whole with the key idea that God is the sole origin and goal of all things. The title is built on Isa. 44:6 and 48:12, “I am the first and I am the last” (cf. 41:4), which meant that Yahweh was sovereign at the beginning of the nation and would be in charge at the end as well. In keeping with this title, God began history at creation and ends it at the eschaton. But the title means he controls not only the beginning and the end but also everything in between; in other words, he is sovereign over history. For the readers, this means that they can know God is in charge now because the Bible recorded his sovereignty over past history, and the prophecies in this book have demonstrated his control over future history. Therefore, they can be assured he is also sovereign in the present time of trouble.

5. God’s control over history is now applied to the future blessings of his faithful followers. Τῷ

ΔΙΨΩΝΤΙ (*tō dipsōnti*, to the one who thirsts) refers to those who have persevered and remained faithful to Christ. In keeping with the Yahweh speech of 21:5–8, it is addressed as much to the reader as it is describing those who inhabit the New Jerusalem. As in John 7:37 (cf. 4:10–15; 6:35), the “thirsty” are those who turn to Christ rather than to the world, and if they do so, the Lord will “give them” (cf. 4:10, 14; 6:32–33; 7:37–39) living water. In this sense, it is also an invitation to the unsaved and continues the mission theme of the book (see Rev. 1:7; 11:13; 14:6–7; 22:17). The imagery is drawn from Isa. 55:1, “Come all you who are thirsty, come to the waters” (cf. Isa. 12:3; 35:7; 41:17; 44:3; 49:10, as well as Ps. 23:2; 36:8; 46:4; Jer. 2:13; Ezek. 34:10–16; Joel 3:18). Aune (1998b: 1127–28) adds Odes Sol. 30.1–2, “Fill for yourselves water from the living fountain. And come all you thirsty and take a drink” (cf. also Sir. 55:23–25; Tg. Isa. 55.1). Giesen (1997: 457) notes the promise in Rev. 7:17, “The Lamb who is at the center of the throne will shepherd them and will guide them to life-giving springs of water.” This prepared for “the water of life” here and in 22:17, referring both to spiritual life now (for the reader) and eternal life in the new heaven and new earth. Thus, as in the Gospel of John, this is an invitation to the spiritually “thirsty” to come and drink of the “water of life,” but here and in 22:17 John adds **δωρεάν** (*dōrean*, freely) last for emphasis. This may also reflect Isa. 55:1, which adds to the invitation to “come to the waters” the further promise, “You who have no money, come, buy, and eat.” Yet there may well be double meaning here, as on the one hand it means the thirsty will receive it “without cost,” and on the other hand it is “a free gift from God” (cf. John 4:10, “free gift of God”; and Rom. 3:24, “justified freely by his grace”).

4. Challenge to Overcome, Not Be a Coward (21:7–8)

The section concludes with a challenge to the readers to recognize the difference between those who are faithful and those who are not, that is, to decide whether to be a “conqueror” (21:7) or a “coward” (21:8). The opening **ὁ νικῶν** (*ho nikōn*, the one who overcomes/conquers) is drawn from the conclusion of each of the seven letters, where it contained the eschatological promises^[12] given to all those who were “victorious” over the world with its temptations and suffering. They are the “thirsty” who drank freely of the water of life. They have “conquered” by the blood of the Lamb and by their testimony (12:11); ironically, as the beast “conquers” them by taking their lives, they conquer him by giving their lives. This inheritance sums up all the promises of the seven letters (see n. 12) by telling the reader they **κληρονομήσει ταῦτα** (*klēronomēsei tauta*, will inherit these things). There is some debate as to whether **ταῦτα** refers to the eschatological promises of chapters 2–3 (Mounce, Park), the rest of the vision (21:9–22:5; so Sweet 1979: 299), or to the promises of 21:1–6 (Johnson, Kraft). The best solution is to take the broadest possible referent (i.e., all God’s promises; so Morris, Roloff, Giesen), since this is in effect a summary of the book. Here we have the only use of the inheritance concept in the book, and it is fitting in light of the use of inheritance language in the early church to describe the rewards awaiting the faithful (Acts 20:32; Rom. 8:17; Gal. 3:29; 4:7; Eph. 1:14; 3:6; Titus 3:7; 1 Pet. 1:4).

Yet the greatest blessing of all is the incredible fact that **ἔσομαι αὐτῷ θεὸς καὶ αὐτὸς ἔσται μοι υἱός** (*esomai autō theos kai autos estai moi huīos*, I will be God to each of them, and they will be my children). In a sense, this sums up both the Abrahamic covenant (Gen. 17:7, “to be your God and the God of your descendants”) and especially the Davidic covenant (2 Sam. 7:14, “I will be his father, and he will be my son”; cf. Ps. 89:27–28; Jer. 3:19). Sweet (1979: 300) and Giesen (1997: 458) believe it is significant that the “father” of 2 Sam. 7:14 is changed here to “God.” The “father/son” relationship is reserved in the Apocalypse for God and Jesus (1:6; 2:27; 3:5, 21; 14:1). As is the case with the other blessings in 21:5–7, there is an inaugurated sense to this. For the reader this is the

adoption language of Rom. 8:14–17, “Those who are led by the Spirit of God are the sons of God . . . you received the Spirit of sonship.” Yet full adoption was clearly a future reality, as in Rom. 8:23: “We wait eagerly for our adoption as sons.” Thus, this celebrates the realization of what Paul knew as future hope. We are adopted as God’s children, but now we have only a foretaste of the final state of joy when God’s family is complete and whole in the eternal state. In Rev. 21:3 the voice from the throne said, “They will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God.” This states the same truth in the language of the Davidic covenant.

In contrast to those who inherit the blessings, the sinners will be cast into the lake of fire (21:8). At first glance, this verse does not belong, for the unbelievers have already been cast into the lake of fire (20:13–15). The key is to realize once more that much of 21:5–8 is addressed to the reader and does not just describe the situation in the new heaven and new earth. As said above, we are to ask ourselves whether we are overcomers or “cowards.”

The list of sins^[13] in this verse is a typical “vice code” (see Reid, *DLNT* 1190–94) of the type developed by the Stoics and Cynics and found often within Hellenistic Judaism (Philo, *Sacr.* 15–33; Wis. 14:22–27; 4 Macc. 1:2–4, 22–28; Sib. Or. 2.254–82) and used frequently in the NT (Rom. 1:29–31; Eph. 4:25–32; 5:3–5; Col. 3:5–8; 1 Tim. 1:9–10; James 3:14–16; 1 Pet. 2:1; 4:3, 15). Revelation has three such lists (9:21; 21:8; 22:15), the longest of which is here.^[14]

The list here is not, however, a general enumeration of sins but instead a specific list that draws together the sins of the book. Its purpose is to sum up the depravity of the unbelievers, and each term reflects sins mentioned elsewhere in the book (see Osborne 1993: 68–69). “Unbelief” describes the basic sin that led the nations to reject God’s overtures to bring them to repentance (so 9:20–21; 14:6–7; 16:8, 10–11). It also is the sin of the false teachers (cf. the contrast between the Pergamum believers [who “did not renounce faith in me”] and the heretics in 2:13–16). The “vile” or “abominable” acts are emphasized in 17:4–5 (the “abominations” of the great prostitute) and 21:27 (the “shameful” things not allowed in the New Jerusalem). “Murder” refers of course to the earth-dwellers who have killed the saints (6:9; 9:21; 13:7, 10, 15; 17:6; 20:4). A particularly telling example is 11:9, where the sinners refuse to bury the two witnesses and engage in an orgy of celebration over their bodies. “Sexual immorality” was part of the Nicolaitan cult (2:14, 20), was also practiced by the earth-dwellers (9:21; 14:8; 17:2, 4; 18:3, 9; 19:2), and was often linked with idolatry due to the frequent practice of ritual prostitution in Greco-Roman religion. “Sorcery” or magic was an essential part of the first-century world (see Acts 8:9–24; 13:8–11; 19:17–20) and is stressed in Rev. 9:21; 18:23; 22:15. “Idolatry” is one of the primary themes of the book, again beginning with the heretics (2:14, 20), and is at the heart of the sins of the nations (9:20; 22:15). It is a key aspect of the false religion established by the beast (13:4, 8, 12, 14–15; 19:20). Much of the material in Revelation grows out of the “imperial cult” at the end of the first century (see the introductions to the letters to Ephesus and Pergamum at 2:1–7 and 2:12–17, respectively), and idolatry was a major problem behind the book. “Liars” are often condemned (2:2; 3:9; 14:5; 16:13; 19:20; 20:10; 21:27; 22:15). They are the direct antithesis of God and Christ, who are characterized by “truth” (3:7, 14; 15:3; 16:7; 19:2, 11). Rissi (1972: 104 n. 168, following Lohmeyer) believes that the phrase here “and to all liars” makes this a summarizing formula linked to John 8:44, where we read that the devil has been a liar “from the beginning.” In this sense, lying is “a perversion of everything that is true and valid (opposite of v. 5).” Thus, this list summarizes the sins that send the unsaved to “the lake of fire, the second death” (on which see 19:20; 20:6).

But the first of the list (found only here), δειλοῖς (*deilois*, cowards), is worthy of special consideration. The δέ (*de*, but) that connects 21:7 with 21:8 should have its full adversative force

and may well especially be contrasting ὁ νικῶν (“the conqueror”) with τοῖς δειλοῖς (“the cowards”). While the rest of the list describes the unchurched and wicked who were the enemies of Christianity, this first term probably describes those in the church who fail to persevere but give in to the pressures of the world. Whatever one’s position concerning the “eternal security” issue, these would be those who fit the description of passages like Heb. 6:4–6; 10:26–31; James 5:19–20; 2 Pet. 2:20–21; and 1 John 5:16, namely, those in the church who are overcome with sin and leave their “faith.”^[15] The reader is being asked to make a choice whether to “overcome” the pressure of the world and refuse to succumb to it or to be a “coward” and surrender to sin. Those who do so will join the unbelieving world in eternal damnation.

Summary and Contextualization

The only extended description of “heaven” in the Bible is Rev. 21:1–22:5. In the OT, heaven, apart from being the sky God created, is also the “higher heaven” (“heaven of heavens,” 1 Kings 8:27) where God dwells (Exod. 24:9–12; 1 Kings 8:30), where his throne is (1 Kings 22:19; Ps. 80:1; 103:19), and from which he both judges (1 Kings 8:32) and acts on behalf of his people (Ps. 102:19–21). Yet those OT passages that speak of the afterlife (Job 19:25–27; Ps. 49:15; Isa. 25:8; 26:19; 53:10; Dan. 12:1–3, 13) do not mention dwelling in heaven. In intertestamental literature, however, such a belief becomes explicit, often associated with “paradise” (cf. Rev. 2:7), which was thought to be the Garden of Eden caught up to heaven and awaiting the saints, who will then be allowed to eat of the “tree of life” (T. Levi 18.4, 10–11; 2 Bar. 4.3–7; cf. Rev. 2:7; 22:2). In some places this afterlife constitutes an eternity in heaven (1 Enoch 60.8; 61.12) but in others an eternity on a transformed or renewed earth (1 Enoch 5.7–10; 25.3–7; 32.3–6; 2 Bar. 73–74; 2 Esdr. [4 Ezra] 7:119–24). In Jesus’ teaching, “heaven” is the place where the faithful will be rewarded (Matt. 5:12; 6:20; 13:43) and have their home (John 14:2–3). There will be eternal life there (Mark 10:30; John 3:16). In Paul heaven is the place where our “lowly bodies” are “transformed” to be “like his glorious body” (Phil. 3:20–21, cf. 1 Cor. 15:42–44, 50–54) and in which we have “an eternal house not built by human hands” (2 Cor. 5:1). In Hebrews heaven is the place in which Jesus is “at the right hand of God” (1:3, 13; 8:1; 10:12–13; 12:2) and exalted (7:26), the place where the “greater and more perfect tabernacle” (9:11) and the “city with foundations whose architect and builder is God” (11:10; cf. 11:16, “a better country—a heavenly one”) awaits God’s people. Thus, it is the “kingdom that cannot be shaken” (12:28) that has “better and lasting possessions” (10:34). In 2 Peter the old heavens and earth must perish in fire (3:7, 10) so that the “new heaven and earth” can provide “the home of righteousness” (3:13).

In Rev. 21:1–22:5 the idea of the New Jerusalem and a new Eden on a renewed earth comes to the fore, but it is not in contrast to the idea of heaven. Rather, like the other symbols in the book, it pictures heavenly reality via apocalyptic language. First, heaven is the place where God and the Lamb reign on their throne surrounded by the heavenly court of celestial beings (4:1–5:14; 22:1). But the multitude of victorious saints are also there standing before the throne and worshiping (7:9–17), where they will never hunger or thirst (7:16; cf. 21:4) and where the Lamb will “shepherd” them “to springs of living water” (7:17; cf. 22:1). Heaven in 7:9–17 is almost certainly the same place as the renewed earth of 21:1–22:5. Heaven is also the place where the events are instigated and sent to earth to end this world order and inaugurate the eschaton (the seals, trumpets, and bowls; cf. 11:19). The martyred saints are under the heavenly altar calling for vengeance (6:9–11), and the heavenly realms rejoice when they see the vindication of the

saints (16:5–7; 18:20–24; 19:1–5). Thus, in Revelation heaven and earth are united in one eternal order, and the dichotomy between the two in this sinful age (cf. Rom. 8:19–22) is broken. When the old heaven and earth are destroyed (20:11; 21:1), the “new heaven and new earth” (21:1) become one.

There are three major themes in the inaugural vision (21:1–8). First, there is the end of the old aeon of sin (“the first heaven and first earth have passed away,” v. 1). Before the new order can be inaugurated, the old order has to be destroyed (also Mark 13:31; 1 Cor. 7:31; 2 Pet. 3:10–13). The “sea,” a symbol of evil, must disappear before the eternity of joy can begin. Second, there is the continuation of the bridal theme from 19:7–8. There the bride is pictured as ready for the wedding, and the guests are invited to the wedding supper. Here the bride is pictured as “adorned for her husband” (21:2), and her wedding adornment is the precious jewels of 21:18–21. Third, there is the uniting of heaven and earth, such that God now actually “dwells” with his people (21:3). All of Scripture longed for a closer relationship with God. In the OT, that focused on the Shekinah presence in the tabernacle and the temple; in the NT, it centered on the Shekinah presence of God in Jesus (cf. John 1:14). Since heaven has now become the “new earth,” the deprivations of the old order (tears, death, mourning, crying, pain) will be no more (Rev. 21:4).

God’s inaugural address from the throne (21:5–8) adds perspective to these themes. He begins with the thematic statement that “all things” are now “made new,” referring to the final “new creation” that will replace the first creation of Gen. 1, which has been destroyed. That is why debates over the exact state of the resurrection body or the true physical state of heaven are fruitless. God never tells us what heaven will be like, only that it will be entirely “new.” This is all based on who God is. As the Alpha, he created the “first heaven and first earth.” As the Omega, he will create the “new heaven and new earth.” Yet as the “Alpha and Omega,” he also exercises sovereign control over this present reality we are living in, which stands between the beginning and the end. That is why 21:6b–8 is addressed not to the future reality but to the current reader of the book. We are challenged to make certain that we are indeed the “thirsty,” for they are the only ones who will be given “the spring of the water of life.” We are also challenged to be “overcomers” (see 2:7, 11, 17, et al.), for only they will “inherit these things.” But if we are “cowards,” if we fail to persevere and to remain faithful to Christ, we will join the sinners in the lake of fire.

Additional Notes

21:3. Some manuscripts (P 046 051 □ et al.) have οὐρανοῦ instead of θρόνου. However, the better manuscripts (Ⓜ A 94 vg Irenaeus et al.) support “throne,” and the other is probably the result of influence from 21:2.

21:3. This is another difficult text-critical decision, for many manuscripts (E P 051 1006 1611 1854 et al.) read the singular λαός, in keeping with OT and NT parallels. But slightly better manuscripts (according to Metzger 1994: 688) have the plural λαοί (Ⓜ A 046 1 94 2042 2053 et al.), and it is possible that a later scribe conformed the text to the more traditional covenant promise. Thus, the plural “peoples,” the more difficult reading, is preferable.

21:3. Several manuscripts omit αὐτῶν θεός (2081 94 0446 1 Ⓜ et al.) with variances in wording, while others have it (A P 051 2030 2050 et al.), again with variance in wording. The manuscript evidence is extremely difficult to evaluate with confidence, but the presence of the phrase is the more difficult reading because it is added to the formula and is somewhat superfluous.

21:4. Several manuscripts (A 025 051 1006 1611 2053 □^A et al.) omit ὅτι, but it fits the text well and may have been accidentally omitted, perhaps because of the ἔτι that had preceded it. Both UBS⁴ and NA²⁷ include it in brackets.

21:5. Several copyists (ⲓ P 051 1 1006 1859, followed by TR) have **μοι** after **λέγει**. This was probably an added comment to specify that the command was given to John, and the shorter reading (supported by A 046 94 1611 1854 et al.) is more likely.

21:6. **Γέγοναν** is an unusual formation, with an aorist ending on the perfect verb **γέγονα**. Therefore, later scribes either changed it to **γέγονα** to agree with the following **ἐγώ** (ⲓ* P 046 et al.) or have the proper perfect third plural **γεγόνασιν** (206 254 469 1006 1841 et al.). However, the unusual reading is found in ⲓ^c A 1678 1778 Irenaeus^{lat} Primasius and is the more likely reading that accounts for the others.

21:6. The introductory “I am” fits the similar uses in 1:8 and 22:13. But the question is whether it should read **ἐγώ εἰμι** (A 1006 1841 2053 et al.) or **ἐγώ** (046 025 ⲓ □ et al.). In the first case it agrees with 1:8 and in the second case with 22:13. The issue is caught up with **Γέγοναν**, for those manuscripts that have the first singular (see additional note above) also lack **εἰμι**. It is probably best with NA²⁷ and UBS⁴ to retain **ἐγώ εἰμι** as the slightly better reading.

V. New Heaven and New Earth (21:1–22:5)

A. Coming of New Heaven and New Earth (21:1–8)

► B. New Jerusalem as the Holy of Holies (21:9–27)

C. New Jerusalem as the Final Eden (22:1–5)

B. New Jerusalem as the Holy of Holies (21:9–27)

After the introductory vision (21:1–8), an angel gives John a detailed look at the city of God (vv. 9–10), moving from its beauty (v. 11) to its gates and foundations (vv. 12–14), its measurements (vv. 15–17), the precious stones and jewels it is made of (vv. 18–21), and the inner purity and glory of the city (vv. 22–27). Schüssler Fiorenza (1991: 109) shows how extensively 21:9–22:5 elaborates 21:1–8: “21:1 is taken up in 22:1–5; 21:2 in 21:9–11; 21:3 in 21:22f. and 22:3; 21:4 in 22:2; 21:6 in 22:1; 21:7 in 22:4; 21:8 in 21:26f. and 22:3.” Yet it is related not only to 21:1–8 but also to 17:1–19:5. Beasley-Murray (1978: 315) goes so far as to call the book *A Tale of Two Cities: The Harlot and the Bride* to bring out the centrality of the antithesis between these two sections; and Krodel (1989: 352–54) provides an extensive synopsis showing the parallels between the two sections (introduction [17:1–3 = 21:9–10], vision [17:4 and 18:16–17 = 21:11; 17:5 = 22:4; 21:27; 22:3a; 17:8 = 21:27; 17:15–18 = 21:24; 18:2 = 21:3, 22; 18:1–3, 9–19 = 21:10–22:5], conclusion [19:9 = 22:6–7; 19:10 = 22:8–9]). The contrast between the two great empires, that of the beast and that of Christ, is certainly intended (see the comparison of 17:1–3 with 21:9–10 below). Schüssler Fiorenza (1991: 111) adds that there are many similarities between the description of the Holy City here and Herodotus’s description of historic Babylon, such as the “foursquare” dimensions and the size given in furlongs. Also, many have noted an ABA pattern in 17:1–22:5, with the eschaton of 19:6–21:8 sandwiched between the contrasting pair of the harlot (17:1–19:5) and the bride (21:9–22:5). Once again, the readers are asked to choose their allegiance carefully. If they are willing to “overcome” the pressures of evil and the persecutions of the wicked, they will participate in the joys and the close communion of the Godhead. If they “cowardly” default to those pressures and join the forces of evil, they will suffer the consequences. Many of the images are drawn from the new temple vision of Ezek. 40–48, an amazing transformation of images because in Ezekiel it is the temple itself that is central while in this section there is no temple (21:22), and the city of God is pictured as the temple itself. In addition to Ezekiel, other passages on the New Jerusalem are important (Isa. 54:10–17; 61:1–22; 62:1–12; Zech. 12:1–13; 2 Esdr. [4 Ezra] 8:52; 10:27, 44, 54–55; Tob. 13:16; 14:4–7; 2 Bar. 4.3–6). Thus, it is central to the passage to realize that the city has become the temple, and God’s Shekinah has now been expanded to include the whole dwelling place of the people of God, heaven itself. This of course has also begun with the church, for the church has become the house of God, the temple (1 Cor. 3:9ff.; 6:19; 2 Cor. 6:16; 1 Tim. 3:15; 1 Pet. 2:5). But in heaven this becomes true in a final and physical sense.

1. Angelic guide transports John (21:9–10))
2. Appearance of the city (21:11–21)
 - a. Beauty (21:11)
 - b. Gates and foundations (21:12–14)
 - c. Measurements (21:15–17)

- d. Materials that constitute it (21:18–21)
- 3. Conditions in the city (21:22–27)
 - a. No temple (21:22)
 - b. No need for sun or moon (21:23–24)
 - c. No need for closed gates (21:25–26)
 - d. Nothing unclean or shameful (21:27)

Exegesis and Exposition

⁹One of the seven angels having the seven bowls filled with the seven last plagues came and spoke with me, saying, “Come, I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb.” ¹⁰Then he carried me away in the Spirit to a great and high mountain, and he showed me the Holy City, Jerusalem, descending out of heaven from God. ¹¹It held the glory of God, and its radiance resembled a precious stone like jasper that shines like crystal. ¹²It had a great high wall that had twelve gates, and there were twelve angels over these gates. The names of the twelve tribes of the children of Israel were written on the gates. ¹³There were three gates on the east, three on the north, three on the south, and three on the west. ¹⁴The wall of the city had twelve foundations, and the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb were on them.

¹⁵The one speaking with me had a gold measuring rod so that he could measure the city, its gates, and its wall. ¹⁶The city lay like a square, its length the same as its width, and he measured the city with the rod. It was 12,000 stadia, with its length, its width, and its height the same. ¹⁷Then he measured its wall; it was 144 cubits thick according to the human measurement used by the angel. ¹⁸The material the wall was made of was jasper, and the city was constructed of pure gold like clear glass. ¹⁹The foundations of the walls of the city were adorned with every type of precious stone. The first foundation was jasper, the second sapphire, the third chalcedony, the fourth emerald, ²⁰the fifth sardonyx, the sixth carnelian, the seventh chrysolite, the eighth beryl, the ninth topaz, the tenth chrysoprase, the eleventh jacinth, and the twelfth amethyst. ²¹The twelve gates were twelve pearls, with each gate constructed of one pearl. The street of the city was made of pure gold like transparent glass.

²²And I did not see a temple in the city, for the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple. ²³The city has no need of sun or moon to illumine it, for the glory of God provides its light, and the Lamb is its lamp. ²⁴The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will carry their glory into it. ²⁵Its gates will never be shut by day, for there will be no night there. ²⁶They will bring the glory and honor of the nations into it. ²⁷Nothing unclean and no one who practices abomination and falsehood will ever enter it, but only those who are written in the Lamb’s book of life.

1. Angelic Guide Transports John (21:9–10)

Here the comparison with 17:1–3 is most obvious. There are three parallels: (1) Both here and there “one of the seven angels having the seven bowls” shows John the vision. That must be intentional here, for there is too great a distance from the bowls of chapter 16 to be anything but a deliberate parallel to 17:1. After the seventh angel poured out his bowl, a voice said, “It is over,” as God said above in 21:6. Thus, the end of the age is seen as having two foci: the completion of the judgments, and the beginning of the new age. (2) In both places John says, “And he spoke with me, saying, ‘Come, I will show you. . . .’” The angel becomes a heavenly guide showing John each woman in turn. Thus, the emphasis falls on the vision first of the great prostitute in all her horrible evil and then of the beautiful bride in all her splendor and joy. (3) After the angel speaks, both say “Then he carried me away in the Spirit,” highlighting a new vision and the centrality of the Holy Spirit in the process. John adds to 17:1 the further description of the bowls as “filled with the seven last plagues,” probably to highlight the judgment content of them for the readers. This makes the contrast even greater, for Babylon the Great was intended for destruction, while the Holy City is intended for eternal bliss.

In 21:2 the New Jerusalem was compared to a bride via a simile (“like a bride”). Here the text shifts to a metaphor (“I will show you the bride”). Park (1995: 181) notes that there are only two other instances in Revelation where John switches from a simile to a metaphor in the same context: 15:2 (“like a sea . . . sea”) and 21:11, 18 (“like a jasper . . . jasper”). In both cases there is no

significant change in meaning, and here as well there is no true change in meaning. L. Thompson (1990: 46–48) points out that John often introduces an image with a simile and then uses it later as a metaphor (e.g., the trumpet in 1:10, fire in 1:14, the sea of glass in 4:6). This is important for the debate as to whether the New Jerusalem is pictured not as a place but as “the bride of the Lamb” (see the discussion at 21:1–2). If the metaphor is similar in meaning to the simile in 21:2, it becomes unlikely that there is a complete identity of the city with the saints. As said above, the city of God is composed of the saints but cannot be limited to the saints themselves.

What is added to 21:2 is that the “bride”/church is τὴν γυναῖκα τοῦ ἀρνίου (*tēn gynaiḱa tou arniou*, the wife of the Lamb), building on all the OT passages mentioning Israel as the “wife of Yahweh” (see on 19:7). This means that now the sacred marriage has taken place, and Christ and the church (Eph. 5:25–27) will now spend eternity together as husband and wife.^[1] Of the twenty-nine times Christ is called “the Lamb” in the book, seven occur in 21:9–22:5, the greatest cluster in the book (21:9, 14, 22, 23, 27; 22:1, 3). Most likely, we are meant to realize that only the sacrificial death of the Lamb and the victory it wrought over the powers of evil has made all this possible.

Thus, the angel in 21:10 ἀπήνεγκέν με ἐν πνεύματι (*apēnenken me en pneumati*, carried me away in the Spirit), the same wording as in 17:3, with “in the Spirit” referring once again to the visionary state (see 1:10). But now instead of the desert (17:3), John is taken onto a “great, high mountain.” Mountains have always been important to Jewish religion, from Mount Sinai, where Moses was given the Ten Commandments (Exod. 19–20), to Mount Nebo, where he was shown the Promised Land (Deut. 34:1–4). Behind this passage is undoubtedly Ezek. 40:1–2, where God gave him the vision of the new temple on “a very high mountain.” As several have shown (Caird, Wall, Beale), Jewish tradition placed the final eschatological city on a mountain (Isa. 2:2; 4:1–5; Mic. 4:1–2; 1 Enoch 18.8; 24.1–3; 25.3; Jub. 4.26), and some (Michaels, Giesen) think that with 14:1 (the Lord standing on Mount Zion with the 144,000) this is Mount Zion here and the Holy City will rest on it. Matthew especially shows that Jesus ministered often on mountains (5:1; 8:1; 14:23; 15:29; 17:1, 9; 21:1; 24:3; 26:30; 28:16) and used mountains as illustrations (5:14; 17:20; 18:12; 21:21; 24:16). Hagner (1993: 86) points out that “Matthew emphasizes mountains in special narratives usually having to do with revelation,” possibly with the idea of “the Messiah’s renewal of Torah for his eschatological people.” The mountain here also has a revelatory function, as John is shown “the Holy City, Jerusalem, descending out of heaven from God.” John emphasizes here and in Rev. 21:2 that the Holy City comes ἀπὸ τοῦ θεοῦ (*apo tou theou*, from God). It is nothing that believers have brought about with their “good works” (19:8) but has its origin in God. This is his δωρεάν (*dōrean*, free gift; see on 21:6) to his people, “the wife of the Lamb.”

2. Appearance of the City (21:11–21)

a. Beauty (21:11)

In the Greek, 21:10–14 forms a single extended sentence, but 21:10 picks up on the introductory themes of 21:9 and so is better placed in the first section. The major characteristic of the Holy City is that it contains τὴν δόξαν τοῦ θεοῦ (*tēn doxan tou theou*, the glory of God). This is the second of three occurrences (15:8; 21:11, 23) of this central biblical concept. In 15:8 “the temple was filled with smoke from the glory of God,” and as here the “glory of God” referred to his Shekinah presence among his people. At Sinai in Exod. 24:15–16, the cloud meant that “the glory of Yahweh” was with his people (also 40:34–35), and in 1 Kings 8:10–12, a cloud filled the temple with his glory (also Ezek. 43:5). At Isaiah’s vision of the exalted Lord in Isa. 6:1–4, the earth is “full of his glory.”

Building especially on Ezek. 43:2–5, Kraft (1974: 268) calls “glory” here the personification of God’s character, especially of his splendor. In Isa. 60:1–2 the “glory of the Lord” especially “appears over” Zion (also 4:5). Beale (1999: 1066) believes that God’s “glory” is the “adornment” of the bride in 21:2b, and it certainly may be part of her clothing, though her “righteous deeds” from 19:8 must also form part of her adornment.

The beauty of the eternal city is described as **ἰωστήρ** (*phōstēr*), which denotes both the “light” of the city and its “radiance” or “brilliance.” It may reflect (no pun intended) Ezek. 43:2 (“I saw the glory of God coming from the east . . . and the land was radiant with his glory”) and Isa. 60:1 (“Arise, shine, for your light has come”). Its brilliant beauty is then likened to “a precious stone like jasper that shines like crystal.” As some point out (Mounce, Beale), the jasper stone is not so much transparent as opaque (it may have been an opal or a diamond; see on 4:3; Kraft 1974: 268 believes it is a diamond), so the emphasis of **κρυσταλλίζοντι** (*krystallizonti*) here is probably not “transparent as crystal” but “shining like crystal.” This reminds us of 4:3, where God on his throne “had the appearance of jasper,” and jasper seems to be the major jewel of the book (it was the first jewel mentioned in 4:3–4; it is the material that makes up the walls in 21:18; and it is the first of the foundation jewels of 21:19–20). In all these passages, the jewels primarily symbolize the glory of God in all its radiance and purity.

b. Gates and Foundations (21:12–14)

In 21:11–12 there are three consecutive parallel **ἔχουσα** (*echousa*, having)[2] participles all modifying “the Holy City, Jerusalem” in 21:10 (“having the glory of God . . . a great and high wall . . . foundations”). It is interesting that the “great high wall” is mentioned first even though it is not described until 21:17–18. In the ancient world, walls were essential for protecting a city in time of siege. But this is not the purpose here, for there is no longer any enemy (though the more general idea of being safe and secure in the city is certainly part of the meaning). The wall is emphasized in 21:18, where we read it is made of jasper, meaning its purpose is not defense but rather radiating the glory of God. It is a “great high wall” because of the size of the city but especially due to the greatness of the glory of God (in keeping with 21:11, “It held the glory of God”). It is mentioned here because it contains the “twelve gates.” Many have commented on the unusually high number of gates. That would be true of a city the size of Jerusalem (it had five: the Essene gate, the water gate, the golden gate, the sheep gate, and the fish gate), but this is a megacity, and there would be many gates at a Babylon or Rome, with which this city is contrasted.[3]

The idea of twelve gates, three on each side, is taken from Ezek. 48:30–35, where the new temple also has twelve, with three on each side. A major difference is that each gate in Ezekiel is named after a tribe, while here it says simply that “the names of the twelve tribes of the children of Israel were written on the gates.” The meaning in Ezekiel is that each tribe has a gate that opens to its own tribal territory. Here the thrust is quite different. These gates provide access to all “humankind,” namely, the “people” (21:3) who have “overcome” the world (21:7a) and so “inherited” the city of God (21:7b). The fact of twelve gates means that access is plentiful, and the names of the twelve tribes written on the gates builds on the symbol of the 144,000 in 7:1–8, meaning that the people of God provide access to the “people” of the world so that they might repent and thus gain entrance to the city of God. With three on each side of the city, there is access from every direction, though the order of the direction (east, north, south, west; Ezekiel’s order is north, east, south, west) is somewhat mysterious. Several believe that John has deliberately turned against the twelve signs of the zodiac by changing the order, following the example of 1 Enoch 33–

36, 72–82 (Lohmeyer, Caird, R. Charles, H.-P. Müller, and Malina link it more positively with the zodiac). This is an interesting possibility but difficult to prove on such slim evidence.

There are “twelve angels over these gates,” and it is common to link these with the “watchmen on the walls” of Isa. 62:6. Though those were probably prophets rather than angels, Jewish tradition saw them as angels (so Sweet, Mounce, Thomas, Aune). But it is better to see the angels not as guards (again, there is no need for guards since all evil has been removed)^[4] but as linked to the angels of the churches in chapters 2–3 (so Beale 1999: 1069) and hence as representing God’s new relationship with his people.

Next (21:14), John describes θεμελίους δώδεκα (*themelious dōdeka*, the twelve foundations) of the wall. The foundations were large stones often chosen for their beauty as well as their strength, such as the foundation stones of the temple (1 Kings 5:17). While the names of the tribes were written on the gates, the foundations were inscribed with “the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb.”^[5] This does not refer to the individual apostles, and the question of whether Paul and Barnabas should be included is not an issue here. They were called “the twelve” even when there were not twelve (e.g., John 20:24; 1 Cor. 15:5), and so the “twelve apostles” are a symbol for the church. Draper (1988: 57–59) alludes to the cornerstone of Isa. 28:16 (cf. 54:11–12) as standing for Israel and applies this to the foundation here, saying the twelve apostles are archetypes of the church. In Eph. 2:20 the church was “built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets,” meaning that the ministry and witness of the NT apostles and prophets undergirded the church (cf. Rom. 15:20; 1 Cor. 3:10). It is significant also that they are “the twelve apostles of the Lamb,” for ἀρνίου (*arniou*, Lamb) occurs seven times in this section (see v. 9), and it is fair to say “the celestial city is distinctively the city of the Lamb in his transcendent glory” (Beckwith 1919: 759). As with the twelve tribes, there is no hint that each foundation stone has the name of one of the apostles on it. Rather, the twelve tribes as an entity are the gates, and the twelve apostles as an entity are the foundation.

It is common to view the twelve tribes and the twelve apostles together as emphasizing the unity of the two covenant groups (Israel and the church) into a whole people of God (R. Charles, Ladd, Rissi, Wall, Läpple, Mounce, Michaels, Giesen, Beale), although the linking of this with the twenty-four elders of 4:4 (so Swete, Beale) depends on their interpretation of the elders (see on 4:4, where the view that they are celestial beings is seen as more likely). This is challenged by Park (1995: 191–94), who believes that the twelve tribes are not the Jewish people but rather “eschatologically restored Israel,” namely, those redeemed by the blood of the Lamb, in keeping with the spiritual interpretation of the twelve tribes as believers in 7:4–8. While this is viable, the presence of the distinct groups, the twelve tribes as the gates and the twelve apostles as the foundation stones, makes it more likely that these do indeed signify Israel and the church. Thus, the message of 21:12–14 is that entry to the celestial city comes through the whole people of God, Israel and the church.

c. Measurements (21:15–17)

In 11:1–2 John was told to take “a measuring reed resembling a rod” and “measure the temple of God, the altar, and those who worship in it.” Here it is not John but the angel of the seven bowls (21:9), and he uses “a gold measuring rod.” A gold rod is appropriate for measuring a “city of pure gold” (21:18) whose street is made of gold (21:21). Measuring reeds were about ten feet four inches long, which is impossibly small in terms of measuring a city this size. The angel is to measure “the city, its gates, and its wall,” but interestingly, no measurements are given for its gates, only for the

city and walls. The gates are probably included in the walls, though they are portrayed in 21:21. In Ezek. 40–41 a “man whose appearance was like bronze” (40:3) measured the new temple and its environs, and his measuring occurs time and again throughout chapters 40–48 (e.g., 40:5–6, 8–9, 48; 41:5, 13, 15; 42:16–17; 43:13; 45:3; 47:3–4).^[6] Also, in Jer. 31:38–40; Zech. 1:16; and 2:1–2, the width and length of Jerusalem (and its environs in Jeremiah) are measured, signifying the restoration of the land. In all these passages, the measuring connotes God’s ownership and protection of his people. The city of God is forever guaranteed the presence and protection of God. This is in keeping with the negatives of this section—no tears, no pain, no sinners, no sun or moon, no night, no impurity, no shame or deceit—God has removed them all! In Rev. 11:1–2 the measuring referred to God’s presence spiritually with his people in the midst of their present travails. Here the measuring is God’s final and eternal presence, and the travails are over.

Like the temple in Ezek. 42:15–20 and 45:2, the city was laid out as **ΤΕΤΡΑΓΩΝΟΣ** (*tetragōnos*, a square, lit., “foursquare”). In Ezekiel the temple complex was 500 cubits square (about 850 feet; interestingly, the very dimensions of Herod’s temple; so Block 1998: 570), and the purpose according to Block was to “reflect a lofty theological and spiritual ideal, according to which the residence of Yahweh must be perfectly proportioned.” Here a similar purpose is probably intended, but all the measurements are incredibly exaggerated. First, in Ezekiel it is a square, with the length and width measured, while here it is a perfect cube, measuring length, width, and height. In other words, the perfection of this city is another degree greater than that of Ezekiel. Second, Ezekiel describes a temple, but this describes a heavenly city, and there is no need for a temple (21:22) because the entire city is a temple. The cube shape matches the shape of the Holy of Holies (20 cubits each direction, 1 Kings 6:20; 2 Chron. 3:8–9). Since the Holy of Holies was the place where the Shekinah resided, this is especially appropriate for the celestial city.^[7] Second, Ezekiel’s actual measurements are multiplied manifold, as the heavenly city is 12,000 stadia in each dimension. According to Aune (1998b: 1161), a Greek stadium equaled 600 feet, an Attic stadium was 607 feet, and an Olympic stadium was 638 feet. Thus, the city is “an enormous cube measuring ca. 1,416–1,566 miles in each direction.” Taking the median of 1,500 miles, this would give the city a volume of about 3,375,000,000 cubic miles (unless it is to be seen as a pyramid, as some have suggested, although that is doubtful since there is no hint of such). This stupendous size has caused some to surmise that some emendation is needed (e.g., to remove the “thousand” or to suggest that the number is the total of the three directions).^[8] But there is no need to change the incredible figures, for other Jewish writings also suggest a huge city (Sib. Or. 5.252—the wall will reach to Joppa; *b. B. Bat.* 75b—it will have a thousand huge gardens; so Beale 1999: 1074–75; Aune 1998b: 1161–62). As the 1,600 stadia of 14:20 was the length of Palestine, the 12,000 stadia here was the length of the Roman Empire (from Joppa [in Spain] to the Euphrates). The number is obviously symbolic (like the 12,000 of 7:4–8). It signifies not only perfection but a city large enough to hold all the saints down through the ages, the saints from “every tribe, language, people, and nation” (5:9; 7:9; cf. 21:24, 26).

After measuring the city, the angel measures the wall (21:17), which is either 144 cubits thick (the more likely since 21:12 portrays it as “a great high wall,” contra Beale 1999: 1076–77)^[9] or 144 cubits high. Either way, the wall is terribly small^[10] for a city 1,500 miles high (an argument for taking the description as more symbolic than literal). Thus, it too is a symbolic number, most likely to be connected with the 144,000 of 7:4 and 14:1, 3 as signifying the whole people of God. As said above, the purpose of the wall is not to protect the city or keep people out, since all the enemies have been destroyed. Rather, its purpose is “beauty and demarcation” (Krodel 1989: 360). It adds a

further thrust to the great size of the city as symbolizing the saints in the presence of God (note that both 12,000 and 144 are in 7:4–8).

John then clarifies that the measurement is μέτρον ἀνθρώπου (*metron anthrōpou*, human measurement, taking ἀνθρώπου as a descriptive genitive). In one sense, this clarifies that the angel is measuring by human standards rather than celestial reckoning. But John adds ὃ ἐστὶν ἀγγέλου (*ho estin angelou*, lit., “which is angelic,” with ἀγγέλου parallel to ἀνθρώπου). Caird (1966: 273–74) believes this means that it is not the standard cubit but refers to the angel as the man, that is, it is the measure of the angel’s forearm (the ancient cubit was the length of a man’s forearm) rather than a human measurement. Thus, the actual size cannot be calculated. But as Michaels (1997: 243 note on 21:17) points out, it is just the opposite. This says the angel is using human calculations. Beale (1999: 1077) believes it points to the “angelic” or symbolic level of meaning,^[11] but the term “angelic” is never used this way in the book. The simplest way to understand this is to take it as pointing to the human means (the standard “rod” used to measure the city and its walls) utilized by the angel (as in the NLT, “the angel used a standard human measure”).

d. Materials that Constitute It (21:18–21)

Gold, precious jewels, and pearls were used in the construction of the city, an echo of Isa. 54:11–12, where God said he would rebuild Jerusalem with “stones of turquoise, your foundations with sapphires . . . your battlements of rubies, your gates of sparkling jewels, and all your walls of precious stones.” As Wu (1995: 251–52) brings out, Isaiah is actually describing the restoration and transformation of the “daughter of Zion” (52:2; 62:11) from abandonment and fear to fulfillment and joy. This is accomplished when the “servant of Yahweh” (52:13–53:12) becomes the “servants” of the restored community, the bride, Zion. The desolate city is transformed into a city decorated with gold and jewels, the bride of Yahweh.

For John this also symbolizes the grandeur and majesty of the New Jerusalem in language reminiscent of the description of God’s throne room in heaven (Rev. 4:3–6). Human language was inadequate for describing the majesty and splendor of God and heaven, so it was common to use precious metals and jewels to highlight his glory. Since the wall was measured in 21:17, it is natural to begin with the wall in delineating its materials. In 21:11 the descending city was described as “a precious stone like jasper that shines like crystal.” Now we are told that the walls are constructed of jasper, one of the most brilliant jewels, perhaps an opal or a diamond would be a modern equivalent. This connotes the brilliance and beauty of the wall that partakes of the glory and majesty of God himself (4:3, “The one sitting on [the throne] had the appearance of jasper”). Yet there is some question whether jasper is the material the wall is made of or is inlaid into the wall (so Mounce), since ἐνδώμησις (*endōmēsis*, material) can mean “interior structure” or “substructure” (BAGD 264; EDNT 1:452). That is possible, but “material” may govern the following statements as well, where it is probably the material used in constructing the city.

The city itself is constructed of “pure gold like clear glass,” similar to the great “street of the city” in 21:21 that is “pure gold like transparent glass.” This reflects 1 Kings 6:20–22, where Solomon overlaid the interior of the sanctuary and the altar with gold,^[12] and this leads Beale (1999: 1079) to say the heavenly city is also “overlaid” with gold. But that is not what it says. This is another transformation of OT imagery, for the text says it is constructed of “pure gold,” not just overlaid with it. Moreover, this gold is “like clear glass,” unlike any earthly gold. It may also be linked with the description of the throne room (cf. 4:6, “In front of the throne was something like a sea of glass, crystal clear”). The reason both the city and its street are constructed of transparent

gold is probably the same theme as the sea of glass in 4:6: its own glory is insufficient, and it can only radiate through its transparency the incomparably greater glory of God himself. The splendor of earthly gold is inadequate; it must be transparent so God’s glory can shine through it.^[13]

From the walls and the city itself, the vision now turns to the foundation stones (21:19–20), which it describes as precious jewels. Earlier, we saw that the use of jewels to portray God (4:3) and his dwelling place (21:11) symbolized his majesty and splendor, contrasted with the false earthly splendor of Babylon/Rome (17:4; 18:12, 16). The same is true here, though now that glory and majesty are extended to his people. Earlier, the foundation stones were inscribed with “the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb,” signifying the church. Now that these foundation stones are “adorned^[14] with every kind of precious stone,” the people of God are portrayed as sharing the divine glory. The only other place *κεκοσμημένοι* (*kekosmēmenoi*, adorned) is used in the book is 21:2, “prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.” There may well be a connection between the two verses, as these are the jewels by which the church as the bride of Christ is “adorned.”

There is a great deal of debate regarding the background of the jewels (see the summary in Jart 1970: 161–70; Beale 1999: 1080–88). Three major theories have been proposed: (1) The twelve jewels are the reverse of a list of the twelve jewels linked with the twelve signs of the zodiac in ancient Egyptian and Arabic lists (a list published by Athanasius Kircher in 1653), thus indicating that John was rejecting any pagan speculations about the “city of the gods” behind the celestial city (so R. Charles; Lohmeyer; Farrer; Kiddle; Caird; Beasley-Murray; Morris 1969: 252; Johnson; Roloff). (2) Eight of the twelve parallel the list of the jewels on the breastplate of the high priest in the LXX of Exod. 28:17–20 and 36:17–20 (MT 39:10–13); and the four others could be due to the ambiguous nature of the Hebrew terms as well as the possibility that John in exile was writing from memory; moreover, the four extra terms in Revelation are semantic equivalents of the ones in the LXX (Jourdain 1911: 449; Rissi; Glasson; Ford; Morris 1987: 245; Sweet; Krodel; Mounce; Beale; Aune; Joosten 1999: 135–43).^[15] (3) Due to the differences with the signs of the zodiac and the breastplate of the high priest, we cannot be certain of either, and it is best to see this list as a general depiction of the glory of the people of God (Ladd; Reader 1981: 456–57; Wall; Harrington; Giesen).^[16] Let us note the lists of the OT, Revelation (the italic terms in the Revelation column are those that differ from the Exodus lists), and the zodiac:

Lists of the Twelve Jewels Compared

Exodus 28, 39	Revelation 21	Zodiac
ruby	jasper	amethyst
topaz	sapphire	jacinth
beryl	<i>chalcedony</i>	chrysopase
turquoise	emerald	topaz
sapphire	<i>sardonyx</i>	beryl
emerald	carnelian	chrysolite
jacinth	chrysolite	carnelian
agate	beryl	sardonyx
amethyst	topaz	emerald
chrysolite	<i>chrysoprase</i>	chalcedony
onyx	<i>jacinth</i> ^[17]	sapphire
jasper	amethyst	jasper

On the basis of the chart, the zodiac hypothesis looks impressive. R. Charles (1920: 2.165–69) builds on the fact that Philo and Josephus linked the jewels of the high priest's breastplate with the signs of the zodiac and then uses the list of the jewels in the zodiac assembled by Kircher, a seventeenth-century Egyptologist, to argue that John has deliberately reversed those jewels to remove himself from such astrological speculations. This is a tantalizing possibility, but the problem is that no corresponding evidence has ever been found to back up the claims of Kircher. Thus, Glasson (1975) concludes that this theory should be "eliminated" from serious consideration. On the whole he is correct, though he overstates the case. Unless we can find some of the manuscripts, we can never know whether Kircher was following ancient ideas or was merely making it all up (see Beasley-Murray 1978: 325). Thus, it must remain a possibility, for it has not been finally disproven either.

Beale (1999: 1080–88) provides a lengthy study arguing for the basic veracity of the breastplate hypothesis, agreeing with Caird (1966: 276–77) that the four different stones are semantic equivalents of the ones in Exod. 28:17–20 LXX and due to the many Greek terms that could be used to translate the Hebrew words.^[18] Moreover, the radically different order is not an insurmountable obstacle, because Josephus on two occasions alludes to those jewels with a different order (*J.W.* 5.5.7 §§233–35; *Ant.* 3.7.5 §§166–71). In Exodus the jewels represent the twelve tribes of Israel (28:21; 39:14), while here they symbolize the apostles. Thus, it is likely that the jewels represent those on the breastplate of the high priest and that the emphasis is on the priestly nature of the church. The church thus is seen as the end-time Israel, and the high priestly imagery is linked with 1:6; 5:10; and 20:6, where the saints are priests of God. This seems the most viable view. The third option is still basically correct but must be subsumed into the second.

In several other places in the OT and Jewish literature, jewels have a significant place.^[19] In Job 28:12–19 precious jewels represent the apex of what is valuable from a human perspective, but they are nothing compared to wisdom. In Isa. 54:11–13 the restored Jerusalem will be made of costly jewels: turquoise, sapphire, ruby, and "sparkling jewels." This passage has already been noted above and certainly forms background for this passage. The new, restored Jerusalem will be precious beyond price, and these foundation jewels further prove that point. Then in Ezek. 28:13 many of the same jewels as in Exod. 28 and 39 (and this passage) adorn the king of Tyre, who is pictured as arrogantly taking on the power and glory of God himself. Since Ezek. 28 stands behind the jewels adorning the great prostitute/Babylon the Great in 17:4 and 18:16, the contrast noted above between the harlot and the bride of Christ is certainly in mind here. In Tob. 13:17–18 the faithful Tobit living in exile thanks God for the glorious future of Jerusalem, echoing Isa. 54:11–12. In 2 Bar. 6.7–8 the "forty-eight precious stones with which the priests were clothed" are buried along with the other cultic elements of the tabernacle until the last days. Probably the forty-eight stones are an extension of the breastplate. At Qumran, 4QpIsa^d also sees the eschatological Jerusalem built of precious stones, and 5QNJ sees the streets of the New Jerusalem paved with jewels. In short, Revelation builds on a lengthy tradition in depicting the majesty of the celestial city yet transforms these images into a description of the glory the saints will receive on the basis of the presence of God and their priestly status in the eternal city.

After the foundations, the twelve gates are described (21:21), reversing the order in 21:12–14 (the gates then the foundations). While the foundations are various precious jewels, each gate consists of "one [huge] pearl." Pearls followed precious jewels in the list of luxury items in 18:12, and there I noted the inordinate worth of pearls in the ancient world, where they were considered the most luxurious of all jewels (note Jesus' parable in Matt. 13:45–46, about a man who sold all he had to

possess one). Moreover, since the walls are 144 cubits (= 216–250 feet) in width (21:17), the gates must be the same, and that means each pearl is pictured as 250 feet in diameter (Aune 1998b: 1187). Thus, this also shows the incredible value of the twelve tribes (21:12–13) in the city of God. Finally, the “great street” of the city, like the city as a whole (21:18b), is constructed of “pure gold like transparent glass.” As in most ancient cities, this refers to the main thoroughfare of the New Jerusalem.^[20] In 22:1–2 the “river of the water of life” flows from the throne down the center of this “great street” in the eternal Eden. There may be a contrast with the “street of the great city” (11:8) in which the bodies of the two witnesses lay, continuing the many contrasts between Babylon and the celestial city. Unlike Babylon/Rome where the streets signified evil, the purpose of this street was to radiate the glory of God, not to reflect its own glory.

3. Conditions in the City (21:22–27)

The rest of the chapter provides a glimpse of the holiness, glory, and joy that will typify life in the eternal city. It consists of a series of negative statements telling what of this earthly sphere will have no part in the city followed by a γάρ (*gar*, for) clause providing the reason for the removal (21:22, 23, 25, with 21:27 having the negative without the γάρ clause). In addition, two parenthetical comments regarding the “nations” (21:24, 26) further clarify the themes in the surrounding context. The passage as a whole tells what conditions will characterize the New Jerusalem.

a. No Temple (21:22)

Jewish portraits of the New Jerusalem tend to emphasize the presence of the eschatological temple there (see on 3:12 and 21:1–2 for passages). Most place the temple at the center of the city, and in Ezek. 40–48 the temple is the entire focus. Thus, it is surprising on the surface that the absence of a temple is stressed. Note that John says Καὶ ναὸν οὐκ εἶδον (*Kai naon ouk eidon*, And I did not see a temple), which may mean he expected to see one (so Aune 1998b: 1166). However, the whole context thus far should prepare us for this moment. We must remember that the major religious feature of the temple was that God resided there. The entire Book of Ezekiel ends with the new name of the eschatological city, “THE LORD IS THERE” (48:35). It was his Shekinah presence in the Holy of Holies that made the temple sacred. But now he physically resides among his people (Rev. 21:3), and the entire city has been made into a Holy of Holies (21:16; see explanation above). As Park (1995: 209–10) says, “Just as the NJ [New Jerusalem] is more than a place, i.e., denoting the community of God’s people, the temple is more than a place, i.e., denoting the presence of God and the Lamb in the community of his people.” Thus, when his presence among his people is final and eternal, there is no need for a temple.

Yet there is some background in the OT and Judaism that the physical temple would not be needed in the final kingdom (see Beale 1999: 1092; Aune 1998b: 1066–67). In Jer. 3:16–17 Yahweh says that in eschatological Zion people “will never say, ‘The ark of the covenant of the LORD.’ It will never enter their minds or be remembered. . . . At that time they will call Jerusalem The Throne of the LORD, and all nations will gather in Jerusalem to honor the name of the LORD.”^[21] This is near the theme of Rev. 21 and may be in John’s mind here. Qumran rejected Herod’s temple and considered their community to be the temple of God but still had a temple in the New Jerusalem. Jesus predicted the destruction of the temple (Mark 13:2 par.) and said to the Samaritan woman, “A time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem” (John

4:21). Stephen said that “the Most High does not live in houses made by men” (Acts 7:47). In Heb. 9 the furniture of the tabernacle (vv. 1–5) has been replaced by the new covenant Christ mediated with his blood (vv. 11–15). In Revelation the temple is heavenly (7:15; 11:19; 14:17; 15:5), and in chapter 21 it comes to earth in the form of the New Jerusalem. Once again, there is no temple in the eternal city partly because it is the Holy of Holies itself.

The other reason there is no temple is that “The Lord God Almighty and the Lamb [last for emphasis] are its temple.” Throughout the OT, the glory of God filled the temple. The Book of Exodus ends on this note; as the tabernacle is set up, it says, “Then the cloud [symbolizing the Shekinah presence of Yahweh] covered the Tent of Meeting, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle” (Exod. 40:34). When the temple was built and the ark was brought into the temple, “The cloud filled the temple of the LORD,” and “the glory of the LORD filled his temple” (1 Kings 8:10–11). Finally, as Ezekiel was brought to the final eschatological temple, the glory of the LORD came from the east, entered the temple through the east gate, and “filled the temple” (Ezek. 43:1–5). Now in the final temple city of the New Jerusalem, that glory so permeates the city that Yahweh *becomes* the temple. With God and the Lamb physically present, there is no need for a temple.

We must also realize that throughout the OT the Shekinah glory of God is connected with his “dwelling” among his people in the temple. Thus, the people of God in the eternal city experience his glory in a final sense, for “the dwelling of God is with humankind, and he will live with them” (21:3). Indeed, John says it is “the Lord God Almighty” who is the temple. This is the ninth and final time this key title is used, and once more it speaks of his sovereign omnipotence (see on 1:8). God is ruler over all history, in control of this world and the next, with full authority over earthly and cosmic forces.

Moreover, not only God but “the Lamb” is the temple. The presence of the Lamb goes back to the imagery of 5:6, where John saw “a Lamb standing as if slain.” Jesus used the imagery of the “temple” when he predicted his death and resurrection, “Destroy this temple, and I will raise it in three days” (John 2:19; cf. Mark 14:57–59 par.). It was his sacrificial death that made the temple and its cultus unnecessary (Heb. 9:1–15). Christ the sacrificial Lamb became the conquering Ram (see Rev. 5:6) and takes his place alongside God the Father as the temple of the eternal city. This also continues the emphasis in the Apocalypse on the unity of God and Christ on the throne (4:2 = 5:6), as the Alpha and Omega (1:8 = 1:17; 21:6 = 22:13), as worthy of worship (4:8–11 = 5:9–14), as judge (14:17–20 = 19:11–21), and now as the temple in the Holy City (see Bauckham 1993a: 54–65).

b. No Need for Sun or Moon (21:23–24)

In Isa. 60:19 the glory of eschatological Zion is depicted in these terms: “The sun will no more be your light by day, nor will the brightness of the moon shine on you, for the LORD will be your everlasting light, and your God will be your glory.” Oswalt (1998: 557) says it well, “If the light of God the Creator has dawned, of what use are the created lights, *the sun and the moon*? Of what good is their pitiful reflected light when he who is light itself (John 1:5) is present?” He goes on to point out how the first-century Jews associated this light with the Messiah (Luke 1:76–79; 2:32; cf. Mal. 4:2) as fulfilled in Jesus (John 1:5, 9; 3:19; 8:12; 12:35–36).

They do not need light ἡ γὰρ δόξα τοῦ θεοῦ ἐλώτισεν αὐτήν (*hē gar doxa tou theou ephōtisen autēn*, for the glory of God provides its light).^[22] This verse flows naturally out of the preceding verse: as the Shekinah glory fills the temple (Ezek. 43:2–3 = Rev. 21:22), so the light of God’s “glory” fills the New Jerusalem (Rev. 21:23), with the result that “there is no need for sun or moon.”^[23] Isaiah 60 as a whole is behind this verse, for themes of light and glory also begin the chapter, as in

60:1 (“Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD rises upon you”) and 60:2b–3 (“His glory appears over you. Nations will come to your light”). In James 1:17 God is called “the Father of the heavenly lights,” and 1 John 1:5 says, “God is light; in him there is no darkness at all” (cf. 1 Tim. 6:16, God “lives in unapproachable light”). The idea of “its lamp is the Lamb” combines Ps. 132:17, “I will . . . set up a lamp for my anointed one,” and John 8:12, “I am the light of the world.” In heaven we will see the final realization of the exhortation in 2 Cor. 4:6, “For God who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ” (cf. Eph. 5:8; 1 John 1:7).

The light of God and the Lamb is so intense that περιπατήσουσιν τὰ ἔθνη διὰ τοῦ φωτός αὐτῆς (*peripatēsousin ta ethnē dia tou phōtos autēs*, the nations will walk^[24] by its light), finalizing the theme in the book on the conversion of the nations (21:24). God sent the “eternal gospel” to the nations and called for them to “fear God and give him glory” (14:6–7). One of the purposes of the seals, trumpets, and bowls was to convict the nations of their sin and call them to repentance. Though the vast majority refused to repent (9:20–21; 16:9, 11), some mourned for sin (see on 1:7) and called out to God (11:13). Then “all the nations will worship” God (15:4), a passage that points directly to this one. As several have noted (Bauckham 1993b: 241–42; Giesen; Michaels; Beale; Aune), 21:24–26 alludes to Isa. 60:3, 5, 11: “Nations will come to your light . . . to you the riches of the nations will come. . . . Your gates will always stand open, they will never be shut, day or night, so that men may bring you the wealth of the nations—their kings led in triumphal procession” (continuing the influence of Isa. 60 on this passage). This finalizes the imagery of the procession of the nations in Isaiah, as Israel was “a light to the nations” (42:6; 51:4) intended to “bring [God’s] salvation to the ends of the earth” (49:6), and the nations were drawn to that light (55:5; 60:1, 3). In 2:2 the “nations will stream to” the eschatological temple that God will establish “in the last days,” due in no small part to the fact that “the people walking in darkness have seen a great light” (9:2). They will bring their gifts to God (18:7) and bow before Yahweh (49:23).^[25] In Rev. 21:3 we are told, “Now the dwelling of God is with humankind,” and here we see that coming to pass, as the nations now enter the celestial city.

John has transformed the Isaianic imagery of 60:1–2. In 60:5 it says “The wealth of the nations will come to you,” and 60:11 states “Men may bring you the wealth of the nations—their kings led in triumphal procession.” The imagery is that of military victory. As Oswalt (1998: 547–48) says, “In its victory parades ancient Rome customarily displayed all the spoils of the defeated people. . . . The climax of the parade was the victor in his chariot, leading the highest living official, preferably the king, of the defeated country as his slave. It is reasonable to believe that the Romans did not begin this practice.” John has changed this imagery of wealth to οἱ βασιλεῖς τῆς γῆς ἔρουν τὴν δόξαν αὐτῶν εἰς αὐτήν (*hoi basileis tēs gēs pherousin tēn doxan autōn eis autēn*, the kings of the earth will carry^[26] their glory into it). In other words, John has replaced the idea of military victory and plunder with that of conversion and worship.^[27] By inserting “glory” instead of “wealth,” there has been a subtle shift of emphasis, for the “glory” theme in Revelation centers on the glory of God (1:6; 4:9, 11; 5:12–13; 7:12; 15:8; 19:1, 7; 21:11, 23) and the conversion of the nations (11:13; 14:7; 16:9). These are the only two verses that speak of any kind of “glory” other than what belongs to God, and it is natural to suppose that 21:24, 26 mean the earthly “glory” that the nations possessed is now being given back to the one who alone deserves it. As Beale (1999: 1095) says, “They are bringing not literal riches but themselves as worshipers before God’s end-time presence (so 22:3–5).” Those among the nations who refused to repent were conquered by the “sword that came out of Christ’s mouth” (19:15, 21) and destroyed. Those who repent (11:13; 14:6–7) have been conquered

by the good news of salvation and now find their place in heaven. What is surprising is that it is “the kings of the earth” who enter the New Jerusalem. Earlier they aligned themselves with the beast (17:2, 18; 18:3, 9), led the armies at Armageddon (16:16; 19:19), and therefore were destroyed with those armies (19:21). In Isa. 60:3 it is “kings,” so John has deliberately stressed “the kings of the earth.” He evidently wishes to emphasize how God’s mercy ultimately triumphs over evil and has redeemed some even from among “the kings of the earth.”

c. No Need for Closed Gates (21:25–26)

This section continues the allusion to Isa. 60, paraphrasing 60:11, “Your gates will always stand open; they will never be shut, day or night.”^[28] The imagery of the closed gate may also be intended in Rev. 3:20: “I stand at the door [gate] and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door [gate], I will come in.” The gates of a city were closed at night to keep unwanted visitors out. Yet there is a seeming anomaly here, for it says “the gates will never be shut ἡμέρας [*hēmeras*, by day],” while in the ancient world the only need was shutting the gates at night. However, this is probably idiomatic for “day by day” or “at any time.” The thrust is that God is in control, and all evil has been destroyed. Therefore, there is no longer any need to keep “the nations” out, and everyone is welcome. Also, since *νὺξ οὐκ ἔσται ἐκεῖ* (*vyx ouk estai ekei*, there will be no night there), the “days” will continue for all eternity. In ancient cities gates were always open during the day, so with the absence of night, the days will be endless and the gates always open. In the Gospel of John, “night” was a symbol for sin (3:2; 9:4; 11:10; 13:30; 19:39). It may have a similar connotation here and in 22:5. The power of sin has disappeared, and there will be no more danger. Thus, this parallels 21:1, “There was no longer any sea,” meaning evil was gone forever.

As a result of the open gates, “the nations” can freely enter (21:26); and when they do so, *οἰσουσιν τὴν δόξαν καὶ τὴν τιμὴν τῶν ἐθνῶν* (*oiousin tēn doxan kai tēn timēn tōn ethnōn*, they will bring the glory and honor of the nations) into the Holy City. In 21:24 they take their “glory” into it, and now they take not only their glory but their “honor” into the eternal city. As Aune (1998b: 1173) points out, “glory and honor” were an ancient word pair for fame and reputation (Ps. 8:5; 28:1 LXX; Job 37:22 LXX; Rom. 2:7, 10; Heb. 2:7) and probably also for bringing wealthy gifts to God, as in the pilgrimage imagery adduced above. In Revelation *τιμὴ* always belongs to God and is part of the worship of both angels (4:9, 11; 5:12, 13; 7:12, where it is always paired with “glory”) and saints (5:13). So here too the “glory and honor of the nations” must mean they worship God in the eternal city. The “glory and honor” that was theirs on earth is now to be handed over to God in heaven, as indeed even Christ will “hand over the kingdom to God the Father after he has destroyed all dominion, authority, and power” at the eschaton (1 Cor. 15:24). They will “glorify and honor” God for all eternity.

d. Nothing Unclean or Shameful (21:27)

The eternal city is to be pure, a sacred space. Therefore, those who would defile it cannot *εἰσελθῆν εἰς αὐτήν* (*eiselthē eis autēn*, enter into it). The idea of “entering into” the New Jerusalem is the reverse image of 3:20, where Jesus promises: “If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will enter in.” Combining the two, we will only “enter” the New Jerusalem when we have allowed Christ to “enter” our lives. The means for “entering” are further defined in 22:14: only those who “wash their robes” will be allowed to “enter the gates into the city.” This parallels Jesus’ teaching of “entering the kingdom” by means of “righteousness” (Matt. 5:20), “doing the will of the Father”

(Matt. 7:21), “becoming like little children” (Matt. 18:3), and being “born of water, namely the Holy Spirit” (John 3:5).

There are two categories (things and people, contra R. Charles 1920: 2.174, who thinks it should be unclean “persons,” not “things”) and three groups that will not be allowed in the celestial city: First, **παν κοινόν** (*pan koinon*, nothing unclean) is found only here in the book but is closely associated with the “unclean things” (so Aune 1998b: 1175) that characterize the empire of the beast (16:13; 17:4; 18:2). In Mark especially, demons are called “unclean spirits” (1:23–24; 3:11, 30; 5:2, 8, 13; et al.), and the name became associated with the realm of evil. In the OT the idea of “profane” or “unclean” things was antithetical to the sanctity of the temple or to the worship of God. Maintaining ritual purity is connected with the commands to be holy (Lev. 11:44–45) and stems from the presence of a holy God among the people (see Westerholm, *DJG* 126). As Yahweh is holy, so must his people be. Unclean things are an abomination to Yahweh (Lev. 11:40–43; Deut. 7:25–26; 14:3; et al.), for they offend his holiness. Thus, in the eternal Holy City nothing “unclean” is to be allowed.

Second, none who **ποιῶν βδέλυγμα** (*poiōn bdelygma*, practices abomination) will have a part in the celestial city. As said above, this is closely connected to the “profane” or unclean things, since they are “abominations” to God (also **βδέλυγμα** in the LXX). In Rev. 17:4–5 the great prostitute held “a gold cup in her hand filled with abominations” and had as part of the name written on her forehead “mother . . . of the earth’s abominations.” This term sums up all of the terrible sins listed in the book (see 21:8), and these have no part in God’s eternal city, for again holiness is the chief characteristic. Thus, anyone “practicing” such things must be excluded.

Finally, anyone practicing **ψεῦδος** (*pseudos*, falsehood) will have no part in the New Jerusalem. In 3:9 the Jews persecuting the saints are called “liars,” and those who lie will take their place with the dogs, the sorcerers, the murderers, and the idolaters “outside” the eternal city. The “false prophet” (16:13; 19:20; 20:10) is characterized by deceitful lies, in contrast to the victorious saints, who have “no lie found in their mouths” (14:5). Beale (1999: 1101) believes that while this includes the unsaved, it is especially descriptive of “those who made profession of their faith but contradicted it by their sinful lifestyle, which was the telltale sign that they were false believers and ‘liars.’” Most likely it describes both groups, the “false” Christians and the “lying” pagans.

The only ones permitted to enter the eternal city are “those whose names are written in the Lamb’s book of life.” This is the last of six places the **τῷ βιβλίῳ τῆς ζωῆς** (*tō biblīō tēs zōēs*, the book of life, with **ζωῆς** an epexegetical genitive: the book that is life) is mentioned: twice those written in it are emphasized (3:5; 21:27), three times those not written in it are emphasized (13:8; 17:8; 20:15), and on one occasion it is opened, signaling the final judgment (20:12). It is specifically the “Lamb’s” book, made possible by his death (13:8) and written “before the foundation of the world” (17:8). The book contains the names of those who are true believers and is modeled after the roll of citizens in ancient cities and especially after the OT register of the citizens of Israel (cf. Ps. 9:5; 87:6; Isa. 4:3). This came to be a heavenly book in which the names of the righteous were kept (Ps. 69:28; Dan. 12:1) and is the basis of the book of life here.

Summary and Contextualization

The first expansion of the “new heavens and new earth” (21:9–27) looks at the “new heaven and new earth” as a Holy of Holies (21:9–27) and as a restored and transformed Eden (22:1–5). It begins with an expansion of 21:1–2 (21:9–14) in which the Holy City descends “with the [Shekinah] glory

of God,” adorned with precious jewels. Its intimate connection with the people of God is seen in that the gates are inscribed with the names of the twelve tribes and the foundations with the names of the twelve disciples. This means that entrance into the celestial city comes through the tribes and the apostles or via the combined people of God, Israel and the church. The measurements of the city (21:15–17) show it to be a perfect cube constructed of pure gold, resembling and yet perfecting the Holy of Holies. Its tremendous size (each dimension is the length of the Roman Empire) contrasts with the earthly “city” of Babylon the Great/Rome. Those who live for earthly splendor (this is a warning to the church and not just to the world) will face eternal judgment (as in 21:8), but those who center on “treasures in heaven” (Matt. 6:20) will be citizens of this eternal city. Theirs will be the splendor of 21:18–21, where the twelve precious stones of the foundations allude to the jewels on the breastplate of the high priest and signify the church as priests of God, finalizing the themes of 1:6; 5:10; 20:6. In heaven the saints as priests will “serve and worship” (7:15; 22:3) God for eternity. The gates constructed of a single pearl and the great street of pure gold (21:21) also emphasize the splendor and majesty of the saints in heaven. One of the most incredible sermons a person can ever deliver is certainly the glories awaiting us in heaven.

The final section of 21:9–27 continues the theme of 21:4 regarding all the negatives of the old earth that are to be removed from the celestial city. There is no temple because all that was signified in the earthly temple (the presence of God and the relationship between him and his people) are now finalized, so the temple is indeed God and the Lamb with his people (21:22). There is no need for external sources of light (21:23, 25) because God’s Shekinah glory and the presence of the Lamb illumine the city. Therefore, all the glory of the nations are surrendered to God. This culminates the mission theme in Scripture. As Jesus said, “The gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world . . . and then the end will come” (Matt. 24:14). Thus, the nations have been evangelized (the missionary journeys of Paul repeated throughout church history), and those who responded to the gospel’s proclamation now enter the eternal city. This is an incredible moment, one the evangelizing church constantly awaits with all its heart. Like 21:1–8, this section also ends with a warning to those who are “impure, shameful, and deceitful” that they will have no place in the New Jerusalem (21:27).

Additional Notes

21:9. Δεῦρο, δεῖξω σοι Beale (1999: 1064) argues that since the angel “shows” John both Babylon and the New Jerusalem, 21:1–22:5 should be interpreted symbolically in the same way that Babylon was (e.g., 17:9, 12, 15, 18). Yet those who interpret more literally can have two responses. First, it is the “bride” more than the city that is “shown” in 21:9, and so the symbol would relate to the Holy City as a “bride.” Second, since Babylon the Great was Rome and much of the imagery of 17:1–18:24 was built on the Roman Empire, one could argue that the New Jerusalem would be as literal as Rome was. As I have often said, however, the whole issue of interpreting the images of the book as literal or symbolic cannot be decided with any certainty. With respect to whether there will be a literal city coming out of the heavens, I would side more with Beale. The reality of heaven will be as much greater than any type of earthly city as my glorified body will be greater than my earthly one. The NT exhausts human language trying to picture a future reality that is beyond what any finite language can portray.

21:24. οἱ βασιλεῖς τῆς γῆς Unlike some (Caird 1966: 279; Rissi 1972: 73–74), I see no need to perceive universalism here or an unsolvable conflict between the destruction of the nations in chapters 18–19 and their conversion here. Those among the nations who reject God’s call will be destroyed (chap. 19), and those who repent will “bring their glory” into the celestial city (chap. 21). Beale (1999: 1097–99) responds to those (e.g., Rissi 1972: 75–79) who say that this pictures the “kings of the earth” being converted in the “lake of fire” and entering the New Jerusalem. The contrast in 21:7–8 between the conquerors and the cowards and the continuation of this theme in 22:11 and 22:18–19 makes it unlikely that one can see universalism in this verse. Indeed, 21:27 says explicitly that the “unclean” and the “idolaters” (referring back to the wicked “nations” earlier in the book) have no place in the celestial city. As Beale says, “The universalist view of Rissi, Vogelgesang, and others is based on an overly literal interpretation of

the *picture* of continually opened gates and the seemingly unceasing pilgrimage of the nations into the city” (1998: 1099). In reality, this is an image drawn from Isa. 60 and not a picture of an eternal stream of the unsaved arising from the lake of fire to enter the eternal city. All the imagery indicates is that this will be eternal punishment (14:11; 20:10), not temporary. These “kings” had to be converted earlier, perhaps at 11:13, for there is no hint whatsoever of any possible conversion from the “lake of fire.”

- V. New Heaven and New Earth (21:1–22:5)
 - A. Coming of New Heaven and New Earth (21:1–8)
 - B. New Jerusalem as the Holy of Holies (21:9–27)
 - C. New Jerusalem as the Final Eden (22:1–5)

C. New Jerusalem as the Final Eden (22:1–5)

The purpose of God in the first Garden of Eden in Gen. 2–3 was to provide a “garden of delight” (the meaning of “Eden”) as part of his covenant with humankind. Adam and Eve were placed in the garden not only to enjoy it but to take care of it as their service to God (Gen. 2:15). In a sense tilling the garden was an act of worship. At the same time, their whole existence was oriented to God. This is why they could partake of the tree of life but not of the tree of knowledge (Gen. 2:17). To do so was to replace dependence on God with dependence on self and one’s own knowledge. When they partook of it, they lost their place in Paradise (the term used in the LXX for Eden) and were thrust out into this world of death (cf. Rom. 5:12–21). To the Jews this Edenic paradise was then taken up to heaven to await the faithful (T. Levi 18.10–11; T. Dan 5.12–13; 2 Bar. 4.3–7). Here in Revelation it has once more come down to join the renewed earth and is now part of the eternal city. Eden has not only been restored but has been elevated and expanded for the people of God in eternity.

1. River of life (22:1–2a)
2. Tree of life (22:2b)
3. No curse (22:3a)
4. New relationship with God and the Lamb (22:3b–4)
5. Conclusion (22:5)

Exegesis and Exposition

¹Then he showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and the Lamb ²down the center of its street. On both banks of the river, there were trees of life producing twelve kinds of fruit, yielding their fruit every month. The leaves of the trees were for healing the nations. ³There is no longer any curse. The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city, and his slaves will worship and serve him. ⁴They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. ⁵There will no longer be night, and they will have no need for the light of a lamp or the light of the sun, for the Lord God will give them light. And they will reign forever and ever.

1. River of Life (22:1–2a)

In 21:9–10 the angel “showed” John the “bride . . . the New Jerusalem.” Now the angel “shows” John the next installment of the glorious vision of the final eternal reality, the regained Eden. In Gen. 2:10 a river “flowed from Eden” to “water the garden,” but “life” was restricted to the “tree of life” (2:9; 3:22–24). Here there is not only the “tree of life” but ποταμὸν ὕδατος ζωῆς (*potamon hydatos zōēs*, the river of the water of life—anarthrous in order to stress the theological force of the idea). In Genesis the river flowed “out of [ἐκ, *ek*, in the LXX] Eden,” but here it flows “out of [also ἐκ] the throne.” Eden has become one with the city. The background is not only Genesis but also Ezek.

47:1–12, where a river flows from the south of the altar in the renewed temple and turns everything it touches fresh, even salt water, so that living creatures and fish flourish. Ezekiel 47 provides the primary background for Rev. 22:1–2, and it pictures the life-giving presence of God among his people in the renewed temple as an Edenlike river flowing from the renewed temple. Also, in Zech. 14:8 “living water will flow out from Jerusalem” on the “day of Yahweh.” This life-giving water (cf. Ps. 36:9; 46:4; Prov. 10:11; 14:27; Isa. 12:3; 35:6–9; 44:3; 55:1; Jer. 2:13; Joel 3:18) is also emphasized in John 4:10–14 (Jesus as the “living water”) and 7:37–39 (the Holy Spirit as “streams of living water”). In Rev. 7:17 the Lamb leads the victorious saints to “streams of living water,” and in 21:6 God gives to believers “the spring of the water of life freely” (also 22:17). All of these images are combined in the “river of the water of life” here. In this context the Johannine connection between “life” and “eternal life” (John 3:15–16, 36; 4:14, 36; 5:21; et al.) is maintained. The added note that this water is “bright as crystal” parallels the “crystal-clear sea of glass” of 4:6, the “crystal-clear jasper” of 21:11, and the “goldlike pure glass” of 21:18, with the added image of “brightness” emphasizing the glory of the final Eden. All of these images symbolize the purity, holiness, and transcendent glory of God.^[1] The ancient world had the same problem with water pollution as we do today (for instance, the harbor of Ephesus was silting up due to alluvium deposits in the Cayster River), so the idea of pure water was also meaningful then.

While the river in Gen. 2 flowed out of the garden, and the river in Ezek. 47 flowed out of the temple, this river flows “from the throne of God and the Lamb.” Thus, the source of this river is God himself. Once more (cf. 3:21; 4:9–11 = 5:9–12; 5:13; 6:16; 7:10; 11:15; 14:4; 20:6; 21:22) God and the Lamb are juxtaposed, continuing the major christological theme of the unity of God and Christ as deity. Bauckham (1993a: 54–65) provides an excellent study of the “worship of Jesus” as God in the Apocalypse, showing how God (1:8; 21:6) and Christ (1:17; 22:13) are equally the Alpha and Omega and how both are worshiped equally in the book. In 3:21 Christ says “I overcame and sat down with my Father on his throne”; also, in 4:2 God sits on the throne, and in 5:6 the Lamb is “standing in the center of the throne” (also 7:17). In chapters 6–21 God is the one on the throne, but now we return to the theme that the throne belongs equally to God and the Lamb, as also in 22:3, where “the throne of God and the Lamb [is] in the city.” *Θρόνος* (*thronos*, throne) occurs forty-five times in the book (three-fourths of the NT occurrences) and is one of the central motifs, symbolizing the sovereign rule of God as judge of the world and protector of his people. Park (1995: 225) points out that elsewhere in the book (esp. chap. 4), the throne stressed the “inaccessibility of the transcendent God,” but here in the New Jerusalem it stresses the nearness of God to his people. In one sense, at the eschaton Christ will “hand over the kingdom to God the Father” (1 Cor. 15:24), but in another sense they will be coregents throughout eternity, as here. These are not contradictory but supplementary. In 1 Cor. 15:24 the turning over of the kingdom to God occurs when “he has destroyed all dominion, authority, and power,” an event that takes place prior to this, at the eschaton. At that time God will make Christ coregent with himself, a position he will hold for all eternity. Thus, it is the spiritual kingdom inaugurated by Christ at his first advent that is given over to God, and in the eternal kingdom both will reign together.

This great river of life in 22:2 will flow *ἐν μέσῳ τῆς πλατείας αὐτῆς* (*en mesō tēs plateias autēs*, down the center of its street). This is certainly the “great street” of 21:21 that is constructed of “pure gold like transparent glass.” Thus, it is the main thoroughfare of the New Jerusalem. The problem is that one can construe this two ways. If it is connected with 22:1, it means the river flows “down the center of the street” of the celestial city (NASB, NIV, NRSV, NJB, REB, NLT; so Beckwith, Beasley-Murray, Michaels). But if it is connected with the rest of 22:2 and begins a new sentence, it

will translate, “In the middle of the street of the city and on either bank of the river grew the tree of life” (PHILLIPS; cf. KJV; so Swete, Thomas). In this case, there are two possible scenarios: the river and the street run alongside one another, with the tree(s) of life in between them, or a single tree is in the middle of the street and is flanked by the river that has split into two branches. These last two options are unnecessarily complicated, and it is better to place 22:2a with 22:1 and to see the **καί** (*kai*, and) in 22:1 and 22:2b as introducing two successive statements (“Then he showed me . . . and on each bank of the river there were . . .”). Thus, “life” is the primary characteristic, with both the “river of life” and the “trees of life” defining the main thoroughfare of the eternal city. By the river being “in the middle of” the great “street” (21:21), it dominates the scene. Eden has been restored but is even greater than it was in Gen. 2–3, for life permeates the whole of it. This section combines Ezek. 47:12 (“Fruit trees of all kinds will grow on both banks of the river”) with Isa. 35:6–9 (“Water will gush forth. . . . And a highway will be there . . . called the Way of Holiness. The unclean will not journey on it”). As Beale (1999: 1105) says, “In addition to the unusual combination of water metaphors with urban road portrayals and other similarities, the two passages (Isaiah and Revelation) also have in common the portrayal of a new creation in which the earth becomes exceedingly fruitful like a garden” (cf. Isa. 35:1–2, 7; 41:18–20; 43:18–20).

2. Tree of Life (22:2b)

In Gen. 3:22 the tree is the source of eternal life, so Adam and Eve must be banished from the garden lest they find immortality in the midst of their sin. Possibly connected to this theme is the “splendid cedar” planted on the mountain in Ezek. 17:22–24, the “tall tree” that “is the envy of all the trees in Eden” of Ezek. 31:2–9, and the tree that touched the sky in Dan. 4:10–12. More closely linked to Rev. 22:2 of course is Ezek. 47:12, where fruit trees grow “on both banks of the river” and whose “leaves will not wither nor will their fruit fail” as they produce “healing.” Then in Proverbs the “tree of life” refers to present blessings when it is linked to “wisdom” (3:18), “the fruit of the righteous” (11:30), “a longing fulfilled” (13:12), and “the tongue that brings healing” (15:4). In Jewish literature these “fruit-bearing trees” are rooted in “an immortal land” (Odes Sol. 11.16), and “unspoiled fruit” is “planted” in Paradise (2 Esdr. [4 Ezra] 7:123–24; 8:52) and will be given to the righteous on the day of judgment (1 Enoch 25.4–5). The saints will “eat” of the tree and have “the spirit of holiness” fill them (T. Levi 18.11). In Ps. Sol. 14.3 the “trees of life” are the saints themselves. In Rev. 2:7 God gives the overcomers “the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.” That promise is fulfilled here.

Since **ξύλον** (*xylon*, tree) is singular, there is some question as to whether it is a single tree (as in Gen. 3) on the bank of the river (so Chilton 1987: 567, who links it with the cross), but it is better to take this as a collective singular (so Beckwith, Lohmeyer, Mounce, Giesen) referring to many trees lining both banks^[2] of the river. This fits the imagery of Ezek. 47:12, where the temple stream has “fruit trees of all kinds” growing “on both banks of the river.” As Block (1998: 696) notes, Ezekiel alludes to the Eden imagery of Gen. 2:15–17, where the trees “remain perpetually green and provide an endless supply of food” (Ezek. 47:12). Thus, the single “tree of life” in Gen. 2:9 has become multiple “trees of life,” and in the final Eden these trees will line both banks of the river of life as it flows down the middle of the great street of the New Jerusalem.

These trees will “produce **καρπούς δώδεκα** (*karpous dōdeka*, twelve kinds of fruit), yielding its fruit every month.” This goes beyond Ezek. 47:12, where the fruit trees bear fruit every month but not twelve different kinds of fruit (see Aune 1998b: 1178). The mention of “twelve kinds” certainly alludes to a twelve-month calendar and especially to the seasons for growing crops. Normally, fruit

appears at its proper season, but in the final Eden there will be no seasons, and abundant fruit will be available every month, an incredible promise for those of us who live for the seasonal fruit crops. This continues the imagery of 21:4; there will be no more “death, mourning, crying, or pain,” and there will be no more hunger. All needs will be met for all eternity.

But not only does the “tree of life” provide food; its “leaves” also provide *θεραπείαν τῶν ἐθνῶν* (*therapeian tōn ethnōn*, for healing the nations^[3]), another allusion to Ezek. 47:12, where the leaves of the trees “heal” the people. But in Ezekiel it is national Israel that is healed (in keeping with the particularism of Ezekiel), while here it is “the nations,” another reference to the conversion of the nations (see Rev. 1:7; 5:9–10; 7:9; 11:13; 14:6–7; 15:4; 21:24, 26). Those nations who reject God’s offer of repentance (9:20–21; 16:9, 11) will be destroyed (11:18; 16:5–7; 18:5–8, 20, 24; 19:19–21). But those who repent will enter the Holy City (21:24, 26) and be “healed” (22:2). This does not mean healing is still needed. Rather, it symbolizes the healing that has already occurred at the eschaton and descending of the eternal city. This probably refers both to physical healing (no hunger and no disease in the New Jerusalem) and spiritual healing (all will be in right relationship to God). Wong (1998a: 220–21) says this symbolizes both the past healing of God’s redemptive work and the future spiritual care of God’s people for eternity.

3. No Curse (22:3a)

Zechariah 14:11 says, “And they will live in [Jerusalem], and there will no longer be a curse, for Jerusalem will dwell secure,” a promise of perpetual peace and safety in the new heavens and new earth (McComiskey 1998: 1235, 1238). This vision echoes that promise. In Zechariah the “curse” (the LXX uses *ἀνάθεμα*, *anathema*, the synonym of *κατάθεμα*, *katathema*, used here)^[4] refers to the total destruction of the apostate nation. There may also be a reference to the “curses” placed on Adam and Eve in Gen. 3:16–19 (v. 17 LXX uses another synonym for “curse,” *ἐπικατάρατος*, *epikataratos*), meaning that the “curse” placed on humankind because of sin has been removed. In the rest of the OT, the “curse” (*חֵרֶם*, *hērem*) especially referred to the judgment of total destruction pronounced against the nations and apostate Israelites. Thus, here it could refer also to the removal of God’s curse against the repentant from the “nations” who enter the eternal city (cf. 22:2b). As in 1:5b; 5:9; and 12:11, the curse has been removed because of the blood sacrifice of the Lamb. Aune (1998b: 1179) adds the possibility that this refers to the removal of war and persecution, since Zech. 14:1–11 refers to the attempt of the nations to destroy Jerusalem and God’s intervention on behalf of his people. Thus, there will be absolute security in the New Jerusalem.

4. New Relationship with God and the Lamb (22:3b–4)

In 22:1b the river flowed out “from the throne of God and the Lamb.” Now in 22:3b we are told again that “the throne of God and of the Lamb will be [the future tense looks at the scene from the perspective of the reader] in the city.” By framing 22:2–3a with the centrality of the divine throne, John is saying that everything the city means to the saints—eternal life, abundant provisions, complete healing, and absolute security—are made possible by the sovereign presence of God and the Lamb among his people. Moreover, since the king is there, it is natural that οἱ δοῦλοι αὐτοῦ λατρεύσουσιν αὐτῷ (*hoi douloi latreuousin autō*, his slaves will worship and serve him). The entire book is written to God’s “slaves” (1:1). It is his “slaves” who are “sealed” in 7:3, and God avenges their blood in 19:2. God’s “slaves the prophets” are shown what “must soon take place” (22:6) and

along with the saints are to be rewarded at the eschaton (11:18). Close parallels to this passage are 19:5, where “you his slaves” are called on to “praise our God,” and 7:15, where the victorious saints “are before the throne of God, and they worship [also λατρεύω] him day and night in his temple.” Λατρεύω has the double meaning of both “service” and “worship” here as well as in 7:15, with all the rich OT connotations of cultic service and worship in the tabernacle and temple. Thus, behind 7:15 and 22:3 is the idea of priestly “service” in the heavenly temple, now the New Jerusalem as the Holy of Holies (21:9–27). The saints are “priests” of God in 1:6; 5:10; and 20:6, and therefore have the great privilege of priestly service (7:15; 22:3) in the eternal kingdom (cf. 1 Pet. 2:5). But now this service of worship will be eternal and complete, for it is worship of God and the Lamb who fulfilled the temple imagery and made salvation in its fullest sense possible. As Park (1995: 235–37) points out, Adam was placed in the Garden of Eden “to work [עָבַד, *ʿabad*, is the same Hebrew verb that λατρεύω usually translates in LXX] and take care of it,” and perhaps with the connotation of “worship and obey” (Cassuto’s translation [1964]) God in it. Since Eden became a prototype for the tabernacle (see Wenham 1987: 19–25), the parallels from Eden to the heavenly temple to the New Jerusalem are quite meaningful. Thus, “John describes the [New Jerusalem] as a restored Eden where the redeemed will fulfill God’s original intention for the creation of man: They will serve and worship God (and the Lamb) whose glory will fill the city” (Park 1995: 237).

Not only will the saints worship and serve God; they also ὄψονται τὸ πρόσωπον αὐτοῦ (*opsontai to prosōpon autou*, will see his face) in 22:4. There are three stages in terms of looking on the face of God: (1) Moses could not look on the face of God because God had declared, “No one may see me and live” (Exod. 33:20). (2) John 1:18 says, “No one has ever seen [the face of] God, but God the One and Only, who is at the Father’s side, has made him known.” (3) Here in the eternal city, God’s people will finally be able to “see his face.” Jesus provided the transition because he was the “incarnate Shekinah” (John 1:14) who was the “face of God” on earth. Yet there is also a spiritual aspect of “seeing the face of God.” As Aune (1998b: 1179–80) says, the idea of “seeing God” became a catch phrase for a true understanding of who God is and a right relationship with him (Job 33:26; Ps. 17:15; 42:2; 3 John 11) and was considered a special eschatological blessing (Num. 6:25; Ps. 84:7; Matt. 5:8; 1 John 3:2; Heb. 12:14; Jub. 1:28; 2 Esdr. [4 Ezra] 7:91, 98; 1 Enoch 102.8). Thus, this is the culmination of some of the greatest hopes of the Bible. In the transformed Eden, God’s people will both live eternally and see his face.

They will also have “his name on their foreheads.” In Exod. 28:36–38 Aaron wore a gold plate on the front of his turban and on his forehead inscribed with the words, “HOLY TO THE LORD.” In Rev. 3:12 Christ promises the victorious saints, “I will write on them the name of my God, the name of the city of my God, the New Jerusalem . . . and my new name”; in 7:3 an angel is going to “seal the slaves of our God on their foreheads”; and in 14:1 the 144,000 standing on Mount Zion have “his name and the name of his Father written on their foreheads.” As said in those passages (and regarding the “mark of the beast,” 13:16), the name or mark on the forehead denotes ownership, status, and protection. The saints will be “a people belonging to God” (1 Pet. 2:9; cf. Exod. 19:5; Titus 2:14). In Rev. 2:17 the saints are promised “a new name” (cf. Isa. 56:5; 62:2; 65:15), and that name will be given to them by God, whose name will be on their foreheads. As 1 John 3:2 says, “We shall be like him [Christ], for we shall see him as he is.”

5. Conclusion (22:5)

To draw together and conclude the vision, John repeats images found respectively in 21:25, 23, and

20:4c. From 21:25 comes “there will no longer be night.” This seems to sum up the negative affirmations of 21:23–27, which allude to the fact that the effects of sin—night, the gates shut, impurity, shame, deceit—will be gone forever.^[5] The gates are always open, and it is perpetual day (v. 25). Moreover, there is no need for “the light of the lamp or of the sun, for the Lord God gives them light” (cf. 21:23, where “the glory of God provides its light”). As Beckwith (1919: 767) points out, in 21:23 the emphasis was on the unusual conditions in the city, while here the emphasis is on the inhabitants of the city and the delights they experience. In Isa. 60:19 the description of eschatological Zion is similar: “The sun will no more be your light by day, nor will the brightness of the moon shine on you, for the LORD will be your everlasting light.” In this world of darkness, light must come from the sun or from lamps. In the eternal world of light, the presence of God will fill eternity with his glory. In this world, the saints must bear the light of God to the places of spiritual darkness (Isa. 42:6; Matt. 5:14–16; Phil. 2:15–16), but in the Holy City his light comes directly from his presence. R. Charles (1920: 2.211) believes that “God gives it light” is a translation of the MT of Ps. 118:27, “The LORD . . . has made his light shine upon us,” itself a reflection of the priestly blessing in Num. 6:25, “The LORD make his face shine on you and be gracious to you.” As such the statement here also emphasizes the new relationship believers will share with God for eternity.

Finally, in the light of the divine presence, the saints βασιλεύσουσιν εἰς τοὺς αἰῶνας τῶν αἰώνων (*basileusousin eis tous aiōnas tōn aiōnōn*, will reign forever and ever). In 2:26–27 the overcomers are promised the same “authority over the nations” that Christ received from the Father; and in 20:4 and 3:21 Christ promised that they “will sit with me on my throne.” Those promises were partially realized in 20:4 when the victorious saints “reigned with Christ a thousand years.” But here that millennial reign is transformed into an eternal reign. This also fulfills Dan. 7:18 (“The saints of the Most High will receive the kingdom and will possess it forever”) and 27 (“Then the sovereignty, power, and greatness of the kingdom under the whole heaven will be handed over to the saints, the people of the Most High”). In Luke 22:30 (par. Matt. 19:28), Jesus promised the disciples that they would “sit on twelve thrones, judging the tribes of Israel,” and in 1 Cor. 6:2 Paul said, “Do you not know that the saints will judge the world?” (cf. 2 Tim. 2:12, “If we endure, we will also reign with him”). This sums up a major biblical theme on the future reign of the saints. Of course, this cannot be meant literally, for every saint will rule a kingdom that only the saints inhabit (there is no hint in Scripture that we will reign over the celestial beings; rather, we are their “fellow servants,” 19:10; 22:9). Thus, it probably means we will participate in the rule of Christ over the eternal kingdom and perhaps “exercise sovereignty over the new creation in a way similar to how Adam was to rule ‘over every living thing that moves on the earth’ (Gen. 1:28)” (Beale 1999: 1116).

Summary and Contextualization

The New Jerusalem will not only be the final Holy of Holies (21:9–27) but also the final Eden (22:1–5). It will be more than a restored or regained Eden—it will be a transformed Eden. All that the original garden could have been is expanded and intensified. The river that flowed from the garden in Gen. 2:10 and from the altar in the temple in Ezek. 47:1 now flows “from the throne” and proceeds “down the center of the street” of the city. This is a superhighway to beat all superhighways ever constructed. The central theme here is life, for the river is “a river of the water of life,” and on both banks of the river is a grove of the “trees of life.” This goes beyond the “tree of life” in Gen. 2:9 and 3:22–24, for these multiple trees also have “twelve kinds of fruit” that

produce life “every month,” and the leaves “heal the nations.” This pictures the healing power of eternal life and the lavish provision of God for his people. In the old order, no one could look on the face of God and live (Exod. 33:20), but now the goal of worship throughout the Bible and the church age is finally realized when the saints “see his face” (22:4). The reason for this is that “the throne of God and of the Lamb” is in their midst, and they have total access to God and the Lamb. Moreover, they in some sense share the throne (3:21; cf. 20:4) and “reign forever” with Christ. Our great privilege is not only to serve him and look on his face but also to reign with him.

- I. Prologue (1:1–8)
- II. Churches Addressed (1:9–3:22)
- III. God in Majesty and Judgment (4:1–16:21)
- IV. Final Judgment at the Arrival of the Eschaton (17:1–20:15)
- V. New Heaven and New Earth (21:1–22:5)
- VI. Epilogue (22:6–21)

VI. Epilogue (22:6–21)

This epilogue consists of a series of utterances, many of them anonymous and difficult to assign to a specific speaker (see the discussion of the verses). Moreover, the order seems somewhat haphazard, with four first-person sayings of Jesus (22:7, 12–13, 16, 20) interspersed with parenetic material that both warns evildoers (22:11a, 15, 18–19) and encourages faithful living (22:7b, 9b, 11b, 14, 17). Into this material is also placed what many consider the two major themes: the authenticity of the prophecy (22:6, 8, 16, 18–19) and the nearness of the return of Christ (22:7, 10, 12, 20). R. Charles (1920: 2.211–15) believes they came from John but had been transmitted in a disjointed form. Thus, he reconstructs the epilogue under three speakers (brackets enclose debatable portions): God (21:6b–8), Jesus (22:6–7, 10 [11], 12–13, 16, 18a [18–19]), and John (22:8–9, 20–21). For other attempts, see Aune (1998b: 1204–6), who notes correctly that the close parallels with 1:1–3 demonstrate that “the author has self-consciously framed the entire composition with similar motifs.” There is no need to rearrange the material into a speculative reconstruction (for a survey of other such attempts, see Beckwith 1919: 781–82), for the organization is deliberate, intended to frame the book with the themes of the prologue: the hand of God and Christ who reveal this prophecy, the nearness of the end of all things, and the importance of faithful endurance for Christ. In addition, some (Kavanaugh, Vanni; [cf. Aune 1998b: 1206–8]) believe the epilogue is constructed as a liturgical dialogue, with a series of speakers arranged in antiphonal form in three sections: 22:6–11, 12–16, and 17–21. Vanni (1991: 355–72) finds a bewildering array of intertwined speakers, from John (22:6a, 8–9a, 10a, 17a, 17c, 17e–20a, 21) to an angel (22:6b, 7b, 9b, 10b–11, 14–15) to Jesus (22:7a, 12–13, 16, 20b) to the Spirit and the bride (22:17b) to the hearers (22:17d, 20c). The very complexity makes it difficult to see a liturgical dialogue here. On the whole, the division into three sections is viable (but with vv. 20 and 21 the conclusion; see below), but the hypothesis regarding a liturgical purpose is speculative and does not fit the data.

The parallels between the prologue (1:1–8) and the epilogue (22:6–21) are numerous: the revelation “shown his slaves” (1:1 = 22:6), authenticating the book as from God (1:1 = 22:6), the contents—“what must soon take place” (1:1 = 22:6), the beatitude (1:3 = 22:7), the “words of the prophecy” (1:3 = 22:7, 10), keeping the words of the book (1:3 = 22:7), the imminent parousia (1:3, 7 = 22:7, 12, 20), the challenge to be faithful (1:3, 6 = 22:7, 9, 11, 14, 17), and the Alpha and Omega (1:8 = 22:13). It is clear that John constructs this as a deliberate parallel to the prologue and to summarize the themes of the whole book. Also, a lot of the imagery reflects the warnings and promises given to the seven churches in chapters 2–3, so the epilogue is specifically addressed to the situations in those churches.

While most assume that the epilogue consists of 22:6–21, Aune (1998b: 1201–2)[1] follows Giblin

(1974) in arguing that 22:6–9 parallels 19:6–10 in concluding the two final sections of the book (17:1–19:10; 21:1–22:9). As John’s attempt to worship the angel in 19:10 concluded that section, so John’s attempt to worship the angel in 22:8–9 concludes this section. The key is to recognize that both 19:1–10 and 22:6–9 function as a conclusion to what precedes and an introduction to what follows (so Schüssler Fiorenza, Krodel, Giesen, Michaels). The question is which aspect of 22:6–9—concluding or introductory—should have primacy. There are four reasons why it is better to place 22:6–9 with 22:10–21: (1) my decision with regard to 19:1–10 parallels this passage, so 22:6–9 is more introductory; (2) as shown above, the themes of 22:6–9 continue throughout 22:10–21 and tie the whole passage together; (3) the *inclusio* with 1:1–3 begins with 22:6–9 and not just with 22:10–21; (4) 22:10 goes with 22:9 and does not constitute the beginning of the epilogue. Thus, while 22:6–9 does conclude the final vision in one sense with the theme of the authenticity of the vision, it primarily begins the epilogue and signifies that the visions of the whole book are trustworthy.

There are thirteen sayings in the epilogue (22:6, 7, 8–9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14–15, 16, 17, 18–19, 20, 21), and the organization is disputed. Some (Vanni, Kavanaugh) see three sections (6–11, 12–16, 17–21), Roloff four (6–11, 12–16, 17–20, 21), and Beale five (6–7, 8–10, 11–12, 13–17, 18–20). For reasons that I will explain below, I organize it into five sections: 6–7, 8–11, 12–19, 20, 21.

- A. Authenticating the book (22:6–7)
- B. Angel’s commands (22:8–11)
 - 1. Worship only God (22:8–9)
 - 2. Do not seal these prophecies (22:10)
 - 3. Choose evil or righteousness (22:11)
- C. Sayings of Christ (22:12–19)
 - 1. Coming soon with his reward (22:12)
 - 2. Identity of the one coming (22:13)
 - 3. Blessing and warning to the saved and the unsaved (22:14–15)
 - 4. Jesus sends revelation to churches (22:16a)
 - 5. Further identity of Jesus (22:16b)
 - 6. Cry for the parousia (22:17)
 - 7. Warning against adding or subtracting from the book (22:18–19)
- D. Plea for Christ’s return (22:20)
- E. Concluding benediction (22:21)

Exegesis and Exposition

⁶Then the angel said to me, “These words are faithful and true. The Lord God of the spirits of the prophets sent his angel to show his slaves what must soon take place.”

⁷“Behold, I am coming soon. Blessed is the one who keeps the words of the prophecy of this book.”

⁸I, John, am the one who has heard and seen these things. And when I heard and saw them, I fell at the feet of the angel who revealed these things to me in order to worship him. ⁹Then he said to me, “Watch out! Don’t do this! I am a fellow slave with you and your brothers and sisters the prophets as well as with those who keep the words of this book. Worship God!” ¹⁰Then he said to me, “Don’t seal the words of the prophecy of this book, for the time is near. ¹¹Let the wicked continue to act wickedly, and let the filthy continue to be filthy. Let the righteous continue to do righteous deeds, and let the holy continue to be holy.”

¹²“Behold, I am coming soon, and my reward is with me to repay all on the basis of their work. ¹³I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End.

¹⁴God blesses those who wash their robes, with the result that they have authority over the tree of life and enter by its gates into

the city. ¹⁵Outside are the dogs, the sorcerers, the immoral, the murderers, the idolaters, and everyone who loves and practices falsehood.

¹⁶I, Jesus, sent my angel to testify to you about these things concerning the churches. I am the Root and Offspring of David as well as the bright Morning Star.”

¹⁷The Spirit and the bride say, “Come,” and let the one who hears say, “Come.” Let the one who thirsts come; let the one who wishes receive the water of life freely.

¹⁸I am testifying to everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book. If anyone adds to these things, God will add to that person the plagues that are written in this book. ¹⁹If anyone takes away from the words of the book containing this prophecy, God will take away that person’s share in the “tree” of life and in the Holy City that are written in this book.

²⁰The one who testifies regarding these things says, “Yes, I am going to come soon.”

Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.

²¹May the grace of the Lord Jesus be with all the readers.

A. Authenticating the Book (22:6–7)

It is debated whether the speaker in 22:6 is Christ (R. Charles, Lohmeyer, Lohse), the interpreting angel of 1:1 and 21:5b (Sweet, Aune), or perhaps one of the angels with the bowls who showed John the New Jerusalem in 21:9 (Swete, Beckwith, Beasley-Murray, Kraft, Prigent, Michaels, Thomas). It is unlikely that the speaker is the Lord, for the tone changes drastically in 22:7; and since it is anonymous, John was probably seeing this as the same angel as in 21:9. The angel’s statement draws together two other passages: in 19:9 an angel said, “These are the true words of God,” and 21:5 expanded that to “These words are πιστοὶ καὶ ἀληθινοί” (*pistoi kai alēthinoi*, faithful and true). The angel here quotes 21:5 nearly verbatim. This description of the prophetic message in the book parallels the character of Christ, who is “faithful” in 1:5 and 3:14, and “true” in 3:7, 14; 19:11. Moreover, like 21:5 it probably speaks of the entire book rather than just the previous vision^[2] and means that these divine revelations can be trusted because they are absolutely true. Since God and Jesus are the ones who have revealed these visions through the angels (1:1; 22:16), they are completely reliable and must be heeded.

The process by which the visions have come is now repeated from 1:1, but the language is unusual. God is called ὁ κύριος ὁ θεὸς τῶν πνευμάτων τῶν προφητῶν^[3] (*ho kyrios ho theos tōn pneumatōn tōn prophētōn*, the Lord, the God of the spirits of the prophets). “Lord” clearly refers to “Yahweh,” the faithful Lord of the covenant. The remainder of the sentence says that God has sent his messages to John as a prophet like the “prophets” of the OT and NT. The idea of “the spirits^[4] of the prophets” (probably a possessive genitive, “the spirits that belong to the prophets,” though perhaps descriptive, “prophetic spirits”) is the same as in 1 Cor. 14:32, “The spirits of the prophets are subject to the prophets.” As for the debate about whether πνευμάτων^[5] refers to the Holy Spirit or to the prophets themselves, one cannot do better than Swete (1911: 303), who says it means “the natural faculties of the Prophets, raised and quickened by the Holy Spirit.” Fee (1987: 696) puts it another way: it refers to “‘the prophetic Spirit’ by which each of them speaks through his or her own spirit.” This echoes Num. 27:16, “the LORD, the God of the spirits of all mankind” (also Num. 16:22), emphasizing the sovereignty of God (so Aune 1998b: 1182–83).

In his sovereignty God revealed the book when ἀπέστειλεν τὸν ἄγγελον αὐτοῦ δεῖξαι τοῖς δούλοις αὐτοῦ (*apesteilen ton angelon autou deïxai tois doulois autou*, he sent his angel to show his slaves). Often in Revelation the visions are “shown” to John (1:1; 4:1; 17:1; 21:9–10; 22:1), and the idea parallels the use in the Gospel of John, where God has “shown” or “revealed” the eternal realities to his Son (John 5:20; 10:32). As Schneider (EDNT 1:281) says, “Δείκνυμι designates as an unveiling of the future a divine announcement that follows (ἃ δεῖ γενέσθαι, 1:1; 4:1; 22:6), usually given through the angels who explain (17:1; 21:9; 22:1, 6, 8).” Thus, it connotes divine revelation. The path by which this came to the church is more fully explained in 1:1–2, as God revealed it

through Christ then an angel to John who gave it to the church. It is debated whether “slaves” here refers to the members of the church (most) or to the circle of prophets (R. Charles, Aune, Giesen). It is more likely that these are Christians in general (see Bauckham 1993b: 85–86), since the term normally refers to believers in the book (1:1; 2:20; 7:3; 19:2, 5, 10; 22:3, 9) and only in 10:7 and possibly 11:18 is used to refer to prophets (see also on 1:1b).

The content of the prophecy, as in 1:1 and 4:1 (cf. 1:19), is “what must soon take place.” The apocalyptic events prophesied in the book are seen as occurring *ἐν τάχει* (*en tachei*, soon). This and its cognate (*ταχύ*, *tachy*) occur four times (22:6, 7, 12, 20) in the epilogue and define one of the primary motifs, the imminence of the final events. But the terms can refer either to speed (“quickly”) or time (“soon”). In Revelation the latter is almost certainly the thrust, alluding to the nearness of the eschaton. This emphasis on the imminence of the end is reflected also in 22:7, 10, 12, 20 and so is a major emphasis. While Jesus emphasized a period of time before the eschaton (“Such things must happen, but the end is not yet,” Mark 13:7 par.), Paul often stressed the imminent return (Rom. 13:11; 1 Cor. 7:29–31; 1 Thess. 4:15; 5:2), as did other NT writers (Heb. 10:25; James 5:8; 1 Pet. 4:7). The problem of the “delay of the parousia” was felt in the NT, and 2 Pet. 3:8–9 responded to it by saying: “With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day. The Lord is not slow concerning his promises.” Thus, to God the period between John’s time and ours still connotes “soon.” While this same problem is even more acute today, nearly two thousand years after these promises, the answer is the same: God in his sovereignty has already determined the time of the end (see also Rev. 6:11), and we can only hold on to the certainty of his promises and wait for his predestined time (see also Mounce 1998: 404). The church in every age is to await Christ’s “soon” return, but the actual timing is up to him. Beale (1999: 1135) adds a salient point: in salvation history, the next eschatological event after Christ’s death, his resurrection, and Pentecost is the second coming. Thus, whether the event was the following year or five thousand years later, it is still “near” in salvation history. As Giesen (1997: 482) points out, John’s purpose here is to underscore the urgency of the situation and to urge the believers to rise above the crisis. That same urgency should be felt in every age.

In 22:7 Christ speaks directly for the second time (cf. 16:15, where he also addresses his imminent return) and clarifies the *ἐν τάχει* from 22:6 as a reference especially to his second coming. While Beale (1999: 1127) characteristically takes this in an inaugurated sense as referring to the “series of comings in blessing and judgment” to the church down through the ages that will be consummated in the parousia,^[6] the parallels elsewhere in the NT make it far more likely that it should be restricted to the second coming itself. The phrase *ἔρχομαι ταχύ* (*erchomai tachy*, I am coming soon—a prophetic present) also appears in 2:16; 3:11; 22:12, 20 (five of the eleven times *ταχύ* appears in the NT); and while it refers to a coming in judgment against the false teachers in 2:16, in all the others it refers to the return of Christ at the end of history.

This is followed by the sixth of the seven beatitudes in the book (1:3; 14:13; 16:15; 19:9; 20:6; 22:7, 14). These final two may be somewhat different. The first five probably mean “God blesses,” but this one means “Christ blesses.” Of course, the emphasis on the unity of Father and Son throughout means that in all cases they act together. As in 1:3 and 16:15, the “blessing” here centers on those who *τηρῶν τοὺς λόγους τῆς προφητείας τοῦ βιβλίου τούτου* (*tērōn tous logous tēs prophēteias tou bibliou toutou*, keep the words of the prophecy [an epexegetical genitive: the words that consist of the prophecies] of this book). *Τηρέω* is used frequently in Revelation (1:3; 2:26; 3:3, 8; 12:17; 14:12; 16:15) as virtually a technical term for the perseverance of the saints, who must “keep what is written” (1:3) and “obey my word” (3:3) or “God’s commandments” (14:12). It speaks

not only of faithful observance but of obedience to the dictates of the prophecies.

Giesen (1997: 483) sees here an intensification of the beatitude in 1:3. There it was the reader and the hearer that were blessed, while here all Christians are responsible to heed these prophecies. As stated in the introduction to this book, perseverance is the primary horizontal theme of the book. In light of the sovereignty of God and the realization that he has foretold the imminent end of the world, the Christian must at all times be ready for Christ's return. That readiness consists of right ethical and spiritual living. Every passage on the return of Christ ends with this demand. The Olivet discourse, especially in Matt. 24:32–25:30, ends with a series of parables on readiness for the eschaton (the fig tree, the days of Noah, the wicked servant, the ten virgins, the talents). First Cor. 15:58 commands believers to “stand firm” and “give yourselves fully to the Lord.” Second Cor. 5:9 says, “Make it our goal to please him.” First Thess. 5:8 states, “Let us be self-controlled, putting on faith and love as a breastplate, and the hope of salvation as a helmet.” Second Thess. 2:15 demands that the faithful “stand firm and hold to the teachings we passed on to you.” In short, the purpose of eschatology in every place is ethics, that is, the demand to walk worthily of the Lord in light of his soon return.

B. Angel's Commands (22:8–11)

This unit is defined by the three sayings of the angel in 22:9, 10, 11. It moves from the centrality of worshiping God (v. 9) to the imminence of the end (v. 10) and the command to continue what they are doing in light of the end (v. 11).

1. Worship Only God (22:8–9)

These verses closely parallel 19:10, where John tried to worship the angel and was told in no uncertain terms not to do so. First, however, he announces that he is the official recipient of the prophecies described in 22:6–7: “I, John, am ὁ ἀκούων καὶ βλέπων ταῦτα (*ho akouōn kai blepōn tauta*, the one who has heard and seen^[7] these things). Throughout the Apocalypse, divisions in the visions have been indicated by “I saw” (5:1, 2, 11; 6:1, 2, 5, 8, et al.) or “I heard” (4:1; 5:11, 13; 6:1, 3, 5, et al.). They are the two primary terms for the visual and auditory aspects of the prophetic visions. Thus, this is virtually a legal statement paralleling 1:1 that John is the divinely chosen prophetic channel of these visions to the churches. But for a second time (after 19:10) he makes the mistake of worshiping the celestial messenger rather than the God who sent him. When John falls down at the feet of the angel to worship him, he commits idolatry (one of the key sins addressed in this book, e.g., 2:14, 20). He has already been rebuked for the same thing in 19:10, but like so many of us, he has not learned his lesson. It is clear that the revelatory experience (note the repetitive “when I heard and saw” the visions) had overwhelmed John, and he could not help himself (see on 19:9–10 for other places this occurs).

Thus, the angel once more (22:9) has to tell John in virtually the same words as 19:10, “Watch out! Don't do this! I am a fellow slave with you and your brothers and sisters.” The two incidents serve to frame the intervening material on the eschaton and its aftermath (19:11–22:5) by highlighting the power of God and of the angels who carried out his orders. It is understandable how in light of this apocalyptic panorama John mistakenly wants to worship the angels who exercise such glorious power on behalf of God and the Lamb. But the angel is quick to point out again that angels are created beings just as humans are and stand alongside us “serving” God (see 7:15 and 22:3 for the saints as priestly servants, and Heb. 1:14 on angels as “ministering spirits”)

rather than above us.

Yet here the messages of 19:10 and 22:9 diverge somewhat. The “fellow slaves” in 19:10 are the victorious saints who have persevered, but here they are further identified as “the prophets” as well as “those who keep the words of this book.” The latter most likely refers to the persevering saints of 19:10 (“who maintain their testimony for Jesus”), but the former would be the circle of prophets to which John belonged.^[8] There is a great deal of emphasis on the authentic “prophecies” given through John in this section (22:6–7, 9–10, 16, 18–19), and that is continued here. Also, the emphasis in the allusion to steadfast endurance is more specifically on “the words of this book” in keeping with the emphasis in the epilogue on the prophecies themselves. In particular, this prepares for the warning in 22:18–19 given to those who do not “keep the words” but “add” or “take away” from them. There is only one imperative in light of all this: τῷ θεῷ προσκύνησον (*tō theō proskynēson*, worship God). This is the basic message of the whole book. There is only one worthy of worship—not the emperor or the Antichrist or the angels but God alone. Eternity will be typified by the unadulterated and direct worship of God. As the Westminster Confession has said, human beings were created to “praise God and enjoy him forever.”

2. Do Not Seal These Prophecies (22:10)

In light of the importance of all believers “keeping the words of this book,” the angel proceeds to command, Μὴ σφραγίσῃς τοὺς λόγους τῆς προφητείας τοῦ βιβλίου τούτου (*Mē sphragisēs tous logous tēs prophēteias tou bibliou toutou*, Don’t seal the words of the prophecy [a collective singular for all the prophecies] of this book). As throughout 22:6–9, the contents of the whole book are seen as prophetic revelations from God through John. The very meaning of ἀποκάλυψις (*apokalypsis*, revelation) in 1:1 is the “unsealing” or uncovering of the hidden truths that God has kept from his people until now. Thus, Christ through the angel is telling John directly that this is the time for unveiling rather than veiling these former secrets. They are now to be made known to everyone. This is the reverse of 10:4, where a heavenly voice told John to “seal what the seven thunders have spoken, and do not write it down,” echoing Dan. 12:4, where he had been told to “seal the words of the scroll until the time of the end.” As Kraft (1974: 278) says, this shows that the eschaton has now arrived. There is no longer any need to keep anything back, for this is the time of full disclosure.

The reason for this is clear: ὁ καιρὸς γὰρ ἐγγύς ἐστιν (*ho kairos gar engys estin*, for the time is near), John is to reveal the contents to everyone. This is a verbatim quotation from 1:3, where both the official church “reader” of this prophecy and those who heed its words are blessed “because the time is near.” As stated in 22:6, the imminence of the parousia and eschaton are also strongly emphasized in this epilogue (on the problem of imminence, see the discussion on 22:6). In light of the nearness of the events, the readers must be told these “prophecies” so they can “keep” the commands and heed the warnings. In short, the emphasis continues to be on ethical responsibility in light of apocalyptic reality. The only possible response is to “worship God” (22:9) and live faithfully for the Lamb (22:11).

3. Choose Evil or Righteousness (22:11)

This verse can be linked to the preceding verses in two ways: it spells out the ethical alternatives hinted at in 22:10, and like verse 10 it alludes back to Dan. 12. In light of the approaching end, Dan. 12:9–10 says, “Many will be purified, many spotless and refined, but the wicked will continue to be wicked. None of the wicked will understand, but those who are wise will understand.” Both in

Daniel and here the world will continue to consist of the wicked and the righteous right up to the eschaton. But in Daniel these are prophetic observations, while in Revelation they become commands. On what grounds does the angel command the unsaved to continue to do wrong?

There are several ways of understanding this seemingly deterministic exhortation: (1) Some (Beasley-Murray 1978: 337; Giesen 1997: 485) read Revelation here as similar to Daniel, seeing this as a command to the wicked people to think about what they are doing. But that weakens the command setting too much. It seems there is no longer any opportunity for reflection; the lines are set, and it is too late to change. (2) Others (Morris, Mounce, Hendriksen, who calls this the “let of withdrawal”—“let him be”) believe this is related to the imminent end. It will come so swiftly that there will be no time for change. But this message seems clearly to be directed at John’s readers and cannot be restricted to the final community at the end of history. (3) Still others believe that this is not to be seen individually but corporately (Michaels 1997: 252). In other words, the individual can change, but the presence of good and evil will continue right up to the return of Christ. This may be a step in the right direction, but it is difficult to prove a switch from the exhortation of individuals thus far to a command addressed only to the groups. (4) Finally, some say that this refers not so much to the actions of individuals but to “the inviolate nature of John’s prophecy” (Wall 1991: 264–65). The evil or good deeds of people will have no effect on the fulfillment of these prophecies. They are grounded in God rather than in the actions of people. This is certainly part of the answer but does not explain the commands themselves.

A combination of the first and second options understood rhetorically may be the best way to understand this difficult set of commands. The angel is warning the unsaved to think carefully about the choices they are making in light of the soon return of Christ (the commands are framed by the imminent parousia in 22:10b, 12a). As Beale (1999: 1132) points out, this must be seen in light of the whole book, with the commands to “hear” in the seven letters and 13:9. This reflects Isa. 6:9–10 in which Isaiah was told to prophesy to an apostate nation who would not receive the message. In that situation God did not want the people to repent (see also Jesus’ use of Isa. 6:9–10 in Mark 4:10–12 par. as well as Acts 28:26–27), and so it became a judgment oracle. There may also be an echo here of Ezek. 3:27, “This is what the Sovereign LORD says, ‘Whoever will listen let him listen, and whoever will refuse let him refuse; for they are a rebellious house’” (see Giesen 1997: 485). This is the sense of Rev. 22:11a. The rebellious and apostate members of the church as well as the pagans are warned that they will soon cross their Rubicon and face an angry God. Indeed, 22:14 and 17 below state that there is still time to “wash their robes,” “hear,” and “come” to the “water of life.” Thus, the hard exhortation of 22:11a must be taken rhetorically as a warning rather than indicating predestination.

Still, John and the other leaders are told to “let the wicked continue to act wickedly, and let the filthy continue to be filthy.” The terms “wicked” and “filthy” are particularly apt and sum up the evil deeds of 21:8 and 22:15. The unsaved are ἁδίκῳν (*adikōn*, wicked), a term that emphasizes their unrighteous disregard for God’s regulations; and they are also ῥυπαρός (*rhyparos*, filthy), referring to their moral defilement. Louw and Nida (1988: 1:769) call the latter “a state of moral impurity and filth.” Due to a similar hardness of heart as existed in the times of Ezekiel, Daniel, and Jesus, John and the other leaders of his churches are told there is little they can do to stem the tide of evil. This is where the corporate dimension noted above is valid. Their task is not to act as moral policemen but simply to proclaim the prophecies (22:10) and let God do his work.

At the same time, they are to encourage “the righteous” to ποιῶντες (*poiēsato*, do; this and the other aorists in this verse are global, emphasizing lives that are characterized by these activities)

“righteous deeds” and the “holy” to continue to “be holy.” Interestingly, δίκαιος (*dikaïos*, righteous) is elsewhere used primarily of the “righteous acts” of God and Christ (15:3, 4; 16:5, 7; 19:2, 11), which form the basis and model for the “righteous deeds” of the saints (19:8; 22:11). In the same sense, the ἅγιος (*hagios*, holy) nature of God and Christ (3:7; 4:8; 6:10; cf. 15:4; 16:5) provides the basis for the “holiness” (20:6; 22:11) of the οἱ ἅγιοι (*hoi hagioi*, the saints, 5:8; 8:3, 4; 11:18; 13:7, 10; 14:12; 16:6; 17:6; 18:20, 24; 19:8; 20:9). Thus, in light of the overwhelming presence of evil in this world, the saints are to be known for their righteous deeds and holy living.

C. Sayings of Christ (22:12–19)

There are seven separate yet connected sayings here: 12, 13, 14–15, 16a, 16b, 17, 18–19. The central point is the emphasis on right living, with 22:12 stressing judgment by works and 22:14–15 separating the readers into the clean and the filthy (like 22:11). All of this is framed by 22:13 and 16b that identify the one who is coming soon.

1. Coming Soon with His Reward (22:12)

The first part is a verbatim quotation from 22:7a, “Behold, I am coming soon.” This is obviously a major emphasis of the epilogue (22:7, 10, 12, 20), reiterating the prologue (1:1, 7). It is also the basis for the warnings of 22:10, 14–15. As stated above, the nearness of the parousia throughout the NT is the basis for the call to ethical commitment. Since Christ is returning soon, we had better be ready at all times, lest he find us unprepared like the ten virgins (Matt. 25:1–13) or the servant who wasted his talent (Matt. 25:14–30). This is stressed in the rest of the verse, for Christ says that when he comes, ὁ μισθός μου μετ’ ἐμοῦ (*ho misthos mou met’ emou*, my reward is with me). This echoes Isa. 40:10, “See, the Sovereign LORD comes with power . . . his reward is with him.” In Isa. 40 the theme is that God would deliver his people from the destruction and exile that would overtake the nation, and his reward will be the return from exile. In Revelation the “reward” is eschatological and relates to the eternal recompense that will be given believers for their faithful walk with Christ, as in 11:18 (see this for the background to “reward”), where the twenty-four elders spoke of “the time for the dead to be judged, and to give a reward to your slaves the prophets.” God and the Lamb will vindicate and reward their people for all that they have sacrificed (see 6:9–11; 21:4) and for all they have done for him. Beale (1999: 1136–37) adds Isa. 62:11 LXX, “Behold, the savior has come to you, bearing his reward.” This is closer to the text here, for there the reward is “salvation.” Here it is not only salvation but recompense for “work” accomplished.

It may be that the first part (reward) is meant exclusively of the faithful while the second part expands this to refer to both groups from 22:11, the wicked and the righteous, since it says, ἀποδοῦναι ἐκάστῳ ὡς τὸ ἔργον ἐστὶν αὐτοῦ (*apodounai hekastō hōs to ergon estin autou*, to repay all on the basis of their work), probably drawn from Prov. 24:12: God will “repay each person according to what he has done.” In this sense ἐκάστῳ would refer to “each person” rather than “each believer.” But the grammar does not point this way. The absence of any conjunction between “reward” and “repay all” means that Rev. 22:12 is a single statement rather than consisting of two parts. However, a careful study of μισθός shows that it does not automatically refer only to a positive “reward.” It refers literally to “payment for work done,” and as such it can refer to “punishment” (Herodotus 8.116–17; 2 Macc. 8:33) as well as “reward” (BAGD 523, which correctly states that the meaning here is “reward or punishment as the case may be”). Indeed, this fits the context remarkably well, with the saved and unsaved side by side in both Rev. 22:10 and

22:14–15.

The idea of “judged according to works” occurs often in Revelation, speaking of both believers (2:23; 11:18; 14:13; 20:12; 22:12) and unbelievers (18:6; 11:18; 20:13). Moreover, this theme is frequent in the OT (2 Chron. 6:23; Job 34:11; Ps. 28:4; 62:12; Prov. 24:12; Jer. 17:10; Ezek. 18:20; Hos. 12:2), intertestamental literature (1 Enoch 41.1–2; Ps. Sol. 2.16; 17.8; 2 Esdr. [4 Ezra] 7:35; 8:33; 2 Bar. 14.12), and the NT (Matt. 16:27; Rom. 2:6; 14:12; 1 Cor. 3:12–15; 2 Cor. 5:10; 11:15; 2 Tim. 4:14; 1 Pet. 1:17). The idea of ethical responsibility and its eschatological consequences is too often ignored in modern preaching and needs to be given more attention. As Lohmeyer (1926: 176) states, Christ appears here as the judge of all humankind, and this is both a promise and a warning, building on verse 11. We must clarify, however, that this is not a “justified by works” theology. It is clear in Scripture that we are “saved by grace through faith . . . not works” (Eph. 2:8–9; cf. Rev. 1:5–6; 5:9–10; 7:14; 12:11; 22:14). To put both teachings together, “We are saved by grace and judged by works.” The teaching here deals not with salvation by works (though it does deal with salvation in its broad sense) but with our eternal reward.

2. Identity of the One Coming (22:13)

This is the last of the τὸ Ἀλφὰ καὶ τὸ Ὠ (to *Alpha kai to Ō*, the Alpha and the Omega) passages, and fittingly all three types of this saying are found here (the only place in the book where this occurs). Moreover, this completes the attribution of the titles to God and Christ in a kind of ABAB order: in 1:8 it refers to God (“Alpha and Omega”), and in 1:17 and 2:8 it applies to Christ (“the First and the Last”). Then in 21:6 it refers to God (“Alpha and Omega, the Beginning and the End”) and in 22:13 to Christ (“Alpha and Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End”). The titles refer to the sovereignty of God and Christ over history. They control the beginning of creation and its end, and therefore they control every aspect of history in between. Since this is the only passage to contain all three titles, it has the greatest emphasis of them all on the all-embracing power of Christ over human history. These are the perfect titles to occur between the emphasis on Christ’s coming as judge in 22:12 and the warnings to the believers and the unregenerate in 22:14–15. Christ is sovereign over all and therefore the one who has authority over the destiny of everyone.

3. Blessing and Warning to the Saved and the Unsaved (22:14–15)

The seventh and final beatitude of the book, like the others, emphasizes perseverance in the faith: (1) in 1:3 God’s blessing falls on those who “read” and those who “heed” the exhortations in the book; (2) in 14:13 he blesses those who die “in the Lord”; (3) in 16:15 the blessed are those who “stay awake and guard their clothes”; (4) in 19:9 the blessing belongs to “those invited to the wedding supper of the Lamb”; (5) in 20:6 it is “those who have part in the first resurrection”; and (6) in 22:7 it refers to “those who keep the words of the prophecy of this book.” The one unifying theme is the necessity of remaining true to the Lord in order to participate in the resurrection to eternal life. In this final beatitude, the language is close to the language of 7:14, where the victorious saints are described as those who “washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.” There too the imagery of “washing their robes” speaks of spiritual revival, that is, ridding their lives of the accumulated filth of this world and living pure lives before God.^[9] As several bring out (Giesen 1997: 487; Mounce 1998: 407), the present tense πλύνοντες (*plynontes*, washing) speaks of an ongoing activity that characterizes their lives. This is a recurring theme in the book, used negatively for the church at Sardis (who had “soiled their clothes” [3:4, with the overcomers there

“dressed in white,” 3:5]) and at Laodicea (who should purchase from Christ “white clothes to wear,” 3:18). Most often, “white garments” are used positively for victorious saints (6:11; 7:9, 13–14; 16:15; 22:14). In 7:14 the “garments” are washed “in the blood of the Lamb,” which is the basis of the victorious life.

Christ gives those who “wash their robes” a new ἐξουσία (*exousia*, authority),^[10] a term used more often in Revelation (twenty-one times) than anywhere else in the NT. Throughout the book, it speaks of the “authority” or “power” given to the saints over the nations (2:26), the demonic hordes over the earth-dwellers (9:3, 10, 19), the two witnesses over their enemies (11:6), the beast over the nations and the saints (13:2, 4–5, 7; 17:12–13), the angels over fire from the altar (14:18) as well as over the earth (18:1), and God over the plagues (16:19). Now this “authority” is given to the saints, and the text returns to the regained Eden theme from 22:1–5. The saints are given “authority” (here this is better than “power”) over “the tree of life,” meaning they have eternal life. This was stated negatively in 20:6, “The second death has no power over them,” but now the positive side is seen, and it is expressed wondrously. Adam and Eve had access to the tree of life (that was why they were expelled from the garden) but hardly authority. In eternity the saints will be able to partake freely of the “twelve kinds of fruit” (22:2) and also to “enter the gates into the city.” In 21:25 the gates of the New Jerusalem are never shut, and through them the nations bring their “glory” into it (v. 26). In contrast, anything that is unclean, vile, or false cannot “enter” it (21:27). Like 21:25–27, the picture here is one of total peace and security, an eternal city that is constantly open to its citizens. Beale (1999: 1139–40) points to the background in Isa. 62:10 LXX (“go through my gates”) and 26:2 (“Open the gates, let a people enter that keeps righteousness”). In Isa. 62 it is salvation that comes to the city.

In contrast to the blessings awaiting the redeemed is the punishment awaiting the wicked (22:15). The righteous enter the “gates into the city,” while the unsaved are ἔξω (*exō*, outside) the city. This hardly means that their home for eternity will be in the suburbs of the Holy City. The imagery parallels that of Jesus dying “outside (ἔξω) the gate” and our need to go to him “outside the camp” (Heb. 13:12–13), which signified the OT curse for the blasphemer who was cut off from the covenant community (Lev. 24:14, 23; Num. 15:36). Thus, the idea is both exclusion and shame, perhaps with the added idea of the Valley of Hinnom (Gehenna), where the trash was burned outside the walls of Jerusalem (cf. Isa. 66:24; Mark 9:48; so Sweet 1979: 317).

There are six items in the catalog of vices, and the last five (sorcerers, the immoral, murderers, idolaters, and liars) are found in the vice list of 21:8 (in a different order; see the discussion there), describing those whose destiny is the lake of fire. The destiny for those who reject Christ will be both shame (22:15) and eternal punishment (21:8). As in 21:8, this list summarizes the sins of the nations (in the Apocalypse) that have brought down the wrath of God upon them. The first describes the sinners as οἱ κύνες (*hoi kynēs*, dogs), an epithet used derisively of fools in Prov. 26:11 and of greedy rulers in Isa. 56:10–11. In Jesus’ day the Jews^[11] called Gentiles “dogs,” and he commanded his disciples not to “give” the “holy” truths of the gospel to “dogs” (Matt. 7:6), namely, those who have treated the gospel with contempt. Paul describes the Judaizing false teachers as “dogs” in Phil. 3:2, and Peter uses the Proverbs passage to describe apostates in 2 Pet. 2:22. Here it could be restricted to the false teachers and their followers of Rev. 2:14–15 and 20–23, namely, those who claim to be Christians but are liars (so Beale 1999: 1141), but it is better to see this more generally of those “who resist the will of God and entangle themselves in demonism and falsehood” (Michel, *TDNT* 3:1103). It would include the false Christians but not be restricted to them. It is possible that the combination of “dogs” with “immoral people” (masculine οἱ πόρνοι)

points specifically to male prostitutes (cf. Deut. 23:18; so Prigent, Giesen, Aune).

The final one of the list has special emphasis, for it extends the language of 21:8 and 27 to **πᾶς ἰλῶν καὶ ποιῶν ψεῦδος** (*pas philōn kai poiōn pseudos*, everyone who loves and practices falsehood). Since Satan is “the father of lies” (John 8:44) and is characterized by “deceit” (Rev. 12:9; 13:14; 20:3, 8, 10), those who live lives of falsehood are especially aligned with him. John 3:20–21 states the reverse of this, “Everyone who does evil hates the light” (here those who “love” lies “do” them), but “whoever does [also **ποιῶν**] the truth comes to the light.” The faithful do not lie (14:5), and there is no place for lies in the celestial city (21:27). Thus, those who love and live for falsehood obviously have no place in heaven.

4. Jesus Sends Revelation to Churches (22:16a)

This is another parallel to 1:1–2, which says God gave the “revelation” to Jesus, who “sent his angel” with it. Here Jesus says again he has “sent his angel” (probably another collective singular referring to all the angelic messengers in the book) to the readers. As a king he authenticates his royal herald, the angel who takes the decree to the people. This is another verse emphasizing the union between God and Jesus. In 1:1 God is the one who initiates the revelation, while here it is Jesus. Yet this specifically identifies the purpose of the message as **μαρτυρῆσαι** (*martyrēsai*, to testify). This is another major theme, as the “testimony” continues in verses 18 and 20. It is linked with 1:2, where Jesus’ testimony was the basis of the visions sent to John (cf. 1:9; 6:9; 12:17; 19:10; 20:4, where it is the church’s “testimony about Jesus”). This seems to be an official “testimony” sent from the heavenly court to the troubled churches on earth.

The major issue here is the relationship between **ὑμῖν** (*hymīn*, you) and **ταῖς ἐκκλησίαις** (*taῖs ekklēsiāis*, the churches). Are they identical (so R. Charles, Ladd, Thomas, P. Hughes, Mounce, Prigent), so that the message is sent to the churches about themselves? If so, the “you” could be the members of the seven churches, and the message would be taken by them to other churches (so Swete, Beasley-Murray). Beale (1999: 1145) takes **ἐπί** (*epi*) to mean “among, in” and so sees the message addressed to “you in the churches.” But several (Beckwith, Lohmeyer, Hill, Michaels, Giesen, Aune) believe that **ὑμῖν** refers to a circle of Christian prophets.^[12] This would fit well with the mention of such a group of prophets in 22:9 as well as the emphasis on the prophecies given to the church (22:6–7, 9–10, 16, 18–19) and is the more likely option. These prophets probably aided John in leading the churches and circulating the book to the churches, possibly paralleling the “brothers” sent around to churches in 3 John 10.

5. Further Identity of Jesus (22:16b)

The Gospel of John is better known for its **ἐγώ εἰμι** (*egō eimi*, I am) sayings, but Revelation has three: 1:8 (“Alpha and Omega”); 1:17 (“the First and the Last”); and this one. The last two are titles of Christ and, like those in the Gospel of John, probably connote that Jesus is the “I Am,” Yahweh (see on 1:17b–18). Here two more titles are added to 22:13 to anchor further the reality of who he is. Each also occurs earlier in the Apocalypse, so this also has an intertextual purpose, binding the book together. First, Jesus is **ἡ ῥίζα καὶ τὸ γένος Δαυὶδ** (*hē rhiza kai to genos Dauid*, the Root and Offspring of David). In 5:5 he is “the root of David,” a military metaphor drawn from Isa. 11:1 and 10 (“the root of Jesse . . . will stand as a banner for the peoples”), which for the Jews connoted the Warrior Messiah who would destroy their enemies (see on 5:5). That image continues here, where the Root of David will be the judge of the wicked (vv. 11a, 15) but adds that he is also David’s

“Offspring.” Here he is seen as the fulfillment of all the Davidic messianic hope. He is indeed the Davidic Messiah.^[13] The second title (ὁ ἀστήρ ὁ λαμπρὸς ὁ πρωϊνός, *ho astēr ho lampros ho prōinos*, the bright Morning Star) is also messianic, alluding to Num. 24:17, “A star will come out of Jacob,” a passage that was seen as messianic in Judaism (see on 2:28). In 2:28 this messianic glory was shared with the faithful followers and also referred to the victory of the Warrior Messiah over his enemies. Thus, both titles refer not only to the messianic nature and glory of Jesus but also his great power over the wicked.

6. Cry for the Parousia (22:17)

Michaels says that Jesus is the speaker for 22:17 as well, on the grounds that Christ speaks in 22:16 and 18–19, and there is no evident change of speaker. While that is certainly possible, it would be awkward for Jesus to quote the cry of the Spirit and the bride that his second “coming” occur, in which case this is a response to Jesus’ promise that he would “come soon” in 22:7 and 12 (held by most scholars). If so, John is likely the one reporting this. But it is equally possible that the invitation is not to Jesus but to all the readers who have not yet made a decision, urging them to “come” (ἔρχου, *erchou*) to Jesus (so R. Charles, Ladd, Mounce, Beale). This would fit the immediate context, in which the “thirsty” are also invited to “come” (ἔρχέσθω, *erchesthō*), and it is difficult to separate the three present imperatives, with the first two addressed to Christ and the last to the readers. It is more natural to take them all together as addressing the readers. Thus, the entire verse would continue the mission theme of the book (see 1:7; 11:13; 14:6–7; 21:6). This is a difficult issue, for both themes (the return of Christ, the necessity of decision) are central to the epilogue. On the whole, it is best hermeneutically to place the immediate context above the larger context; so I opt for the invitation to the reader to “come.” In this case, Christ is probably the speaker.

The invitation first comes from τὸ πνεῦμα καὶ ἡ νύμφη (*to pneuma kai hē nymphē*, the Spirit and the bride). It is also debated whether πνεῦμα refers to the Holy Spirit (Johnson; Bauckham 1993b: 167–68; Mounce) or Spirit-inspired prophets (Swete, Beckwith, Lohse, Lohmeyer, Morris, Giesen, Beale). It is difficult to see a real difference between the two, for the Spirit is the one inspiring the messages (e.g., 2:7) and is even called “the Spirit inspiring prophecy” (see on 19:10). So the best approach is to combine the two options. The “bride” here must be seen not just as the church (19:7–8) but the end-time church entering the New Jerusalem (21:9–10). But what is the difference between “the bride” and “the one who hears” (and says, “Come”) in the next phrase? Most likely the bride is the church of 21:9–10, a literary figure seen in its victory and joy and constituting all who will inherit eternal life, while “the one who hears” is the current church that “hears” the “prophecy” in 1:3 (and 22:18) and “hears” the letters in chapters 2–3 (e.g., 2:7).^[14] In other words, both the final church and the current church call for the reader to “come” to Christ. The reader would be the “thirsty” of the rest of the verse, those unbelievers and false Christians who are ready to listen and act on the invitation.

The last two parts then expand and clarify the call to “come.” The readers are called to examine themselves and determine whether they are “thirsty,” that is, desirous of the “water of life” that will be given “freely.” This is a clear allusion to 21:6, where the risen Lord promises, “To the one who thirsts I will give of the spring of the water of life freely.” Both stem from Isa. 55:1, “Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters” (cf. also Matt. 5:6; John 4:14–15; 7:37). The question is whether this calls unbelievers to Christ (Beasley-Murray, Mounce, Thomas), believers to a closer walk with Christ (Wall, Beale), or perhaps worshipers to the eucharistic celebration (Harrington, Giesen). Yet this is another instance of “both-and” (though the eucharistic interpretation does not

really fit the context). It is part of the mission motif addressing the unsaved and part of the perseverance theme calling Christians to a deeper commitment. This is certainly one of the major purposes of the book, to call back to Christ those members of the church who are straying (such as the churches of Sardis and Laodicea as well as those who have joined the Nicolaitan cult in Ephesus, Pergamum, and Thyatira) and to evangelize those who are lost (a major purpose of the Gospel of John as well).

7. Warning against Adding or Subtracting from the Book (22:18–19)

Again there is debate regarding the speaker, with some thinking it is Jesus (Swete, R. Charles, Schüssler Fiorenza, Mounce, Giesen, Michaels) but others believing it is John (Moffatt, Lohmeyer, Caird, Kraft, Roloff, Krodel). Yet the presence of *ἐγώ* (*egō*, I) along with the verb *μαρτυρῶ* (*martyrō*, I am testifying) parallels 22:16, where “I, Jesus,” sends the angel “to testify,” as well as 22:20, “The one who testifies regarding these things says, ‘Yes, I am going to come soon.’” Since Jesus is the speaker in both verses 16 and 20, it is likely that he is the speaker here as well. In this context *μαρτυρῶ* has a strong legal connotation, introducing what Aune (1998b: 1208–13, 1229) calls an “oath formula” that itself introduces an “integrity formula”^[15] (cf. Prov. 30:5–6; Sir. 18:6; 42:21; 1 Enoch 104.10–11; 11QTemple^a 54.5–7; Philo, Mos. 2.34). The purpose of this is to emphasize further the authenticity of the prophecies (with Rev. 22:6, 10, 16) and to make certain that false teachers do not tamper with them.

The formula here is probably based on Deut. 4:2 (“Do not add to what I command you, and do not subtract from it, but keep the commands of the LORD your God that I give you”) and perhaps 12:32 (“See that you do all I command you; do not add to it or take away from it”). There the formula indicated that the Torah came directly from Yahweh and must not be “supplemented or reduced” (Craigie 1976: 130). In other words, it must be accepted and obeyed in its entirety. This is the key to the meaning of *ἐπιθῆ / ἀιέλη* (*epithē / aphelē*, adds/takes away) here. As in Deuteronomy, Christ is warning against false teachers who distort the meaning of the prophecies by adding their own teaching to it or removing the meaning that God intended. As Beale (1999: 1151) points out, Deut. 4:3 alludes to the Balaam incident (used of false teachers in Rev. 2:14), and Deut. 12:32 in the MT and Targums is actually the first verse of Deut. 13 that discusses false prophets. Beale applies this verse specifically against idolatry, and certainly John would have that in mind due to the Nicolaitan heresy described in chapter 2, but it should be expanded to include other types of false teaching like the libertine proclivities of that same group (see 2:14b, 20–21). The difficulty for us is how to apply this ban. It can hardly restrict differing interpretations regarding the meaning of the book. The key is to apply carefully the meaning of a “false teacher” or heretic. That is not just someone who differs from one’s own understanding (such as pretribulation or posttribulation views, premillennial or amillennial interpretations) or even someone who tries to compute the return of Christ via a “Bible code” or mathematical equation derived from the book. It refers to someone who uses Revelation to restructure the Christian faith, like some of the cults (on the question of heresy, see also Osborne 1991: 311–14) as well as the Nicolaitans in John’s day. At the same time, the use of *παντὶ τῷ ἀκούοντι* (*panti tō akouonti*, everyone who hears—similar language to 1:3) demonstrates that it is directed to every reader. In John’s day it was especially meant for the seven churches for whom the visions were intended. For our day it must be directed to every person in the church who “hears” this message. It is an awesome responsibility to write a commentary on this book or to preach or teach a Bible study on it. But this warning is meant not just for official church teaching but for every person who reads or hears this message (see Michaels 1997: 259). We

are all responsible to make certain we interpret the book in accordance with the message God intended.^[16]

For such people Christ provides a severe warning, reversing the beatitudes of 22:7 and 14 (and in keeping with the blessings and curses of the Torah, e.g., Num. 5:23; Deut. 29:20). Aune (1998b: 1213–15) calls this a “conditional curse formula” that is centered not on human law but on divine law, similar to Paul’s in Gal. 1:8–9 (“If anyone is preaching to you a gospel other than what you have accepted, let him be eternally condemned”). It is God who will carry this out. As such, Aune says, it is similar to Käsemann’s “sentences of holy law” (1969: 66–81) in that it begins with “If anyone,” focuses on God’s eschatological activity, and follows the principle of *lex talionis*. Those who twist the divinely inspired prophecies to their own ends will suffer the consequence that fits their sin: (1) If they “add” their own meanings, “God will add to that person the plagues written in this book.” These are the “plagues” like the “plague” tortures of the demonic horsemen (9:18, 20), the “plagues” inflicted on the earth-dwellers by the two witnesses (11:6), the “plagues” of the seven bowls (15:1, 6, 8; 16:9, 21), or the “plagues” inflicted on Babylon the Great (18:4, 8). In other words, they will be treated as unbelievers and suffer the punishments to be inflicted on the wicked. (2) If they “take away” God’s meaning, “God will take away that person’s share in the tree of life.” This is more extreme, because it means they will suffer the “second death” (2:11; 20:6) or the lake of fire. The “tree of life” is found in 2:7 and 22:2 and stands for the gift of eternal life. The former deals with earthly judgments, the latter with eternal judgment.

Since it is said that God will “take away” their “share,” scholars often debate whether this implies the apostasy of the believer (e.g., Beale 1999: 1153, who says it does not). In one sense this is not the critical issue, since Beale admits that Revelation does describe the apostasy of members of the church. Both Calvinists and Arminians must warn their congregations against this danger, in keeping with the constant warnings of the book. In this sense Revelation is like Hebrews, 2 Peter (cf. 2:20–22), or 1 John (which discusses the “sin unto death,” 1 John 5:16). There is a strong sense of warning against apostasy throughout, and since it is directed at members of the seven churches, the warning is valid within both a Calvinist (it could not happen to the elect but could happen to other church members) and an Arminian (it could happen to anyone in the church) framework. Still, it is a valid theological issue, and I would hold to the possibility of believers losing their faith on the basis of parallels in John 15:1–8; Heb. 2:1–4; 6:4–8; 10:26–31; James 5:19–20; 2 Pet. 2:20–21; 1 John 5:16; as well as Rev. 2:5; 3:3; 21:8; 22:18–19. Thus, the reader is warned here that distorting God’s message in these prophecies is tantamount to apostasy, and the person guilty of it will become an apostate unbeliever in God’s eyes.

D. Plea for Christ’s Return (22:20)

Jesus is once again seen as ὁ μαρτυρῶν (*ho martyrōn*, the one who testifies; cf. 1:5; 3:14; 22:16, 18), pointing once more to Jesus as the source of the prophecies. This is the concluding promise of Jesus’ series regarding his imminent return in verses 7 and 12 and repeats the ἔρχομαι ταχύ (*erchomai tachy*, I am going to come soon—again a prophetic present) of the others. But it anchors the other two by beginning with ναί (*nai*, yes, indeed), which as in 1:7 is an authenticating particle that in a sense provides the divine imprimatur to the statement. This is a fitting climax to the book. The statements throughout regarding the inauguration of the events that will introduce the return of Christ and thus the eschaton rightly conclude with the primary promise itself. “Indeed,” Christ says, it will happen soon.

The natural response of the church follows in liturgical style, as the divine affirmation is

followed by the church's "Amen," another particle of affirmation that occurs with *vaí* in 1:7. The present imperative *ἔρχου* (*erchou*, come) repeats the tense of Jesus' promise ("I am coming") and adds a special urgency to the church's desire for Christ to return (so Aune 1998b: 1234). Several scholars (Sweet, Beasley-Murray, Prigent, Roloff, Giesen) believe this reflects the eucharistic service, and that is certainly a possibility. But then does "Come, Lord Jesus" refer to Jesus' coming in the eucharistic presence (Krodel 1989: 378; Harrington 1993: 226) or an inaugurated coming in the Eucharist that looks forward to the final coming (Beale 1999: 1155)? Or is there no eucharistic connotation but an exclusive desire for Jesus' final coming (Aune 1998b: 1234–35)? Due to the absence of eucharistic language in the context and the frequent emphasis on the parousia throughout the epilogue, the third is most likely the correct view. The only basis for a eucharistic setting is its use in a eucharistic setting in Did. 10:6 (see below), but that is insufficient proof. "Come, Lord Jesus" seems a deliberate translation of "Marana tha" (Aramaic for "Our Lord, come" in 1 Cor. 16:22 and Did. 10.6). That this translates an Aramaic prayer shows it reflects one of the oldest credal prayers in existence. In Did. 10.6 it occurs in context with a warning to repent ("If anyone is holy, let him come; if anyone is not, let him repent. Marana tha. Amen"), and in 1 Corinthians the same is true, "If anyone does not love the Lord—a curse be on him. Marana tha." The same is true here, as the prayer for the Lord's return is set in a context of warning (22:18–19). Therefore, as in the rest of the NT (see on 22:7), the return of Christ is both a promise and a warning, and it provides a fitting conclusion to John's book.

E. Concluding Benediction (22:21)

Nearly all of Paul's letters (Romans is the only exception) as well as Hebrews conclude with some form of "Grace be with you." This means that the book is not only prophetic and apocalyptic but is seen also as an epistle (see also the epistolary introduction in 1:4). The purpose of the epistolary invocation of ἡ χάρις τοῦ κυρίου Ἰησοῦ (*hē charis tou kyriou Iēsou*, the grace of the Lord Jesus) functions here the same way it does in Paul's epistles, to call for divine "grace" to enable the readers to obey the injunctions and persevere in their difficult situations. Τοῦ κυρίου Ἰησοῦ is most likely a subjective genitive ("May the Lord Jesus show you his grace"), praying for divine favor to fall on them. As an epistle, the Apocalypse has addressed the problems the readers were facing and challenged them to listen to God's solutions for their dilemma. Thus, here John asks "the Lord Jesus" (drawn from 22:21) to shine upon them with sovereign strength so they can indeed be "overcomers" (e.g., 2:7) and be ready for the Lord's return. Throughout the epilogue, ethical responsibility in the light of Christ's soon return has been stressed (22:7b, 9b, 11b, 14, 17) and warnings have been issued to the unfaithful (22:11a, 15, 18–19). In light of the seriousness of the situation, God's "grace" is needed.

Finally, John asks that Christ impart his grace to πάντων (*pantōn*, all), similar to some epistles (2 Corinthians, 2 Thessalonians, Titus, Hebrews) but different in that they have "you all." It is likely that John intended this for all his readers, not only the seven churches but the unsaved who might read this (see the additional note on the text-critical problem). This fits closely the mission theme of the epilogue that has sought not only to strengthen the believers but to bring the unbelievers to Christ as well (22:17; cf. 22:11a, 15). The grace of God and of the Lord Jesus is available to all who are open to the truths of the book, saints and sinners alike.

Summary and Contextualization

This complex epilogue serves as the perfect conclusion to the book, for it sums up the key emphases: the sovereignty of God, the soon return of Christ, and the necessity of both conversion for unbelievers and perseverance on the part of believers. To anchor these critical truths, John goes to great length to stress the authenticity of the book as a prophecy received directly from the Lord (22:6, 8, 18–19). That so few of the speakers are identified is deliberate, for John wants the reader to focus on the message rather than the one speaking it. Moreover, whether it is Christ or John, the message is ultimately from Christ. Therefore, the reader must choose now between God and evil (22:11), for the end is soon to appear. The time for decision is today (cf. Heb. 3:7, 13, 15; 4:7), while the invitation to “come” (Rev. 22:17) is still available. For the believer, however, the desire for Christ to fulfill his promise to “come soon” (22:7, 12, 20a) is an ever-present reality, and we can only affirm, “Amen, come, Lord Jesus” (22:20b). Yet “all” of us, unbeliever and believer alike, can find hope only in “the grace of the Lord Jesus” (22:21). Without his grace, belief and strength to persevere are impossible goals.

Additional Notes

- 22:14.** Instead of “wash their robes,” which is supported by $\overline{\text{A}}$ 1006 2020 2053 et al., some manuscripts (046 1 94 TR) have “do his commandments.” The latter is probably an assimilation to that theme in 12:17 and 14:12 (see Metzger 1994: 690), though Goranson (1997) argues for its authenticity on the grounds of internal consistency and the patristic evidence (Tertullian, Cyprian, Tyconius, Andrew, and Arethas use this reading).
- 22:19.** The KJV (following the TR of Erasmus) has “book of life” rather than “tree of life,” and some have used this to condemn modern versions. However, there is no manuscript basis for this apart from the Vulgate, and it is almost certainly an Erasmusian retroversion from the Vulgate.
- 22:21.** Later scribes were obviously confused by the ending, for there are three text-critical problems in it: (1) Many either added $\chi\rho\iota\sigma\tau\acute{o}\varsigma$ (046 051 94 1006 1854 et al.) or had “our Lord Jesus Christ” (205 254 2067 vg et al.), and a couple (2329 cop^{bo}) even omitted “the grace of our Lord Jesus.” But the reading, “the grace of the Lord Jesus” is well attested ($\overline{\text{A}}$ 1611 2053 et al.) and accounts best for the other readings. (2) As Metzger (1994: 690–91) points out, there are seven different readings for the last two words, probably to specify more concretely who John had in mind: “with all” (A vg^{ww} Tyconius Beatus); “with you all” (296 TR et al., probably to limit the blessing to the readers in the seven churches); “with all of us” (2049 2050, for the same reason as the previous reading); “with the saints” ($\overline{\text{A}}$ it^{sig}, due to the belief that John would not ask for God’s grace for unbelievers); “with your saints” (2329, a variant of the previous one); “with all the saints” (046 051 94 1006 et al.); and “with all his saints” (2030 syr^{ph}). While some prefer “all the saints” (R. Charles 1920: 2.226) or “the saints” (Swete 1911: 313; Aune 1998b: 1239) because they believe that John would intend the blessing for believers and that the other readings are assimilations to Paul’s concluding benedictions, “all” is the shortest reading and the most difficult (cf. Beale 1999: 1157), since it expands the thrust to the saved and the unsaved alike. Therefore, it is slightly more likely. (3) A concluding $\acute{\alpha}\mu\eta\eta\nu$ is appended to the benediction by 1611 94 051 046 $\overline{\text{A}}$ TR et al., but as Metzger (1994: 691) says, if it is the original reading, it is hard to explain why it would have been omitted in A 1006 2065^{txt} Tyconius et al.

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5.30.2 [314](#) n. 7

Justin Martyr

Dialogue with Trypho

81.4 [2](#)

Martyrdom of Polycarp

in toto [290](#)

12–13 [131](#)

Origen

De principiis

1.2.10 [3](#)

Shepherd of Hermas

Visions

1.1.3 [244](#)

2.1.1 [244](#)

2.1.3 [395](#)

2.4.1–3 [395](#)

Tertullian

Against Marcion

3.14.3 [2](#)

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Notes

Introduction to Revelation

- [1]. Vorster (1988: 119–20) argues correctly that genre in and of itself cannot produce meaning, for content and function do not constitute genre. Both classification and interpretation are needed. As a classification tool, however, genre still has value in aiding interpretation (see Osborne 1983: 1–27).
- [2]. Malina (1995: 10–18) has challenged this classification; he believes that the idea that Revelation is apocalyptic has arisen through “spurious information” derived from the nineteenth century and that the ancients would have regarded it as “astral prophecy.” The contents therefore are “visions of the sky, celestial visions, of celestial beings” (14). Thus the book must be understood from the standpoint of cosmic symbolism. Malina is certainly correct regarding the great amount of astral symbols (portents in the sky, comets, volcanic eruptions, celestial beings), but he has greatly overstated his case when he makes this the key to the book rather than one aspect among many. As Aune (1997: lxxxix) argues, “apocalypse” is not anachronistic and was part of the title in more than one ancient work. Astral imagery is not more central than OT imagery or Jewish or Hellenistic backgrounds.
- [3]. For the history of interpretation see Beckwith 1919: 318–36; and esp. G. Maier 1981 *passim*.
- [4]. Court (1979: 1–17) lists chiliastic, Alexandrian, recapitulation theory, historical, eschatological, contemporary-historical, literary, and comparative approaches.
- [5]. In a lengthy excursus Thomas (1992: 505–15) notes the three views held by dispensational scholars. Some (Bullinger, Welch) have taken an entirely prophetic approach, arguing that the seven letters did not refer to the historical cities but rather prophesied the seven ages of the church. The majority hold to a historico-prophetic view (Lange, Gaebelein, Ironside, J. Smith, Walvoord), stating that while they addressed problems in the actual churches of John’s time, they also looked forward to seven ages in the history of the church. The primary argument is suitability, that the descriptions in the letters fit the periods of the church age. As Thomas brings out, however, there are serious problems with the prophetic view, for its proponents see church history through the lens of the seven letters. Most historians would see quite a different development of church history. Moreover, this is based only on *Western* church history, while the church is and always has been a worldwide movement. Thus most recent dispensational scholars (Thomas, Saucy, Blaising, Bock) agree with the majority view, that the letters are entirely historical and not a prophecy of the church age.
- [6]. Moyise (1995: 16) has 122 from Isaiah, 97 from Psalms, 83 from Ezekiel, 82 from the Pentateuch, 74 from Daniel, 73 from the Minor Prophets, and 48 from Jeremiah. Obviously, it all depends on what one considers an allusion.
- [7]. See Fekkes (1994: 69–101) and Beale (1999: 86–96) for the various ways the OT is used in Revelation; and see Moyise (1999: 112–13) for the theory that John used both Hebrew and Greek on the basis of which fit better in a given context (the consensus is that John utilized the Hebrew OT more than the LXX).
- [8]. Boring (1992: 708–11) finds five key christological portions in the book: 4:1–11:19 (as Christ gave direction to the scenes as the center of much of the action); 7:1–17 (receiving praise for the redemptive effects of his death); 12:1–5 (his birth and exaltation—passive here but the focus of the action); 19:11–21 (the messianic victory); and 20:1–10 (the millennial reign of the Messiah).
- [9]. Here I summarize Osborne 1993: 63–77.
- [10]. Against the view that it is only the martyrs on the thrones see Marshall 1968: 335–37.
- [11]. Carnegie (1982: 250–54) finds a major purpose of the hymns to be eschatological celebration of God’s acts before they happen. In this he sees a close parallel between the wording of these hymns and the songs of praise in Isa. 40–55. There is developed a sense of “anticipation of what God will do” (252).

I. Prologue (1:1–8)

- [1]. L. Thompson (1990: 177–78) says that due to the nonpublic nature of these prophecies, the authentication of the work was necessary and was accomplished in two ways: emphasizing the divine initiation of the visions (1:1–2) and drawing the reader into the visions by stressing the necessity of listening and obeying (1:3).
- [2]. As Roloff (1993: 18) admits, we cannot know for certain “whether this similarity [to second-century prefaces] is purely coincidental or an indication of a fixed literary form that had developed shortly before the turn of the century.”
- [3]. Only 1 Peter uses the word group among the Catholic Epistles. In 1 Pet. 1:7, 13 ἀποκαλύψει Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ refers to the parousia (cf. also 4:13); in 1 Pet. 1:5 and 5:1, Peter rejoices/partakes in the “salvation” and “glory” to be “revealed” at the eschaton. In all these a strong apocalyptic flavor can be detected.
- [4]. Schlier (*TDNT* 2:27–28) and Schneider (*EDNT* 1:280–81). Schlier points out that this sense of “disclose, reveal” is the dominant meaning in the LXX, where the verb has this connotation 82 of 119 occurrences.
- [5]. R. Charles (1920: 1.6), D. Hill (1971–72; esp. 408–11), and Bauckham (1993b: 84–86) believe this refers to Christian prophets on the grounds of the use of “servants” for prophets in Amos 3:7 and Jer. 23:18, and its use for prophets in Rev. 10:7; 11:18; and possibly 19:2. They see the mention of “his servant John” at the end of this verse as a reference to John’s prophetic work as the seer of the visions (also Kraft, Mounce, and Schüssler Fiorenza; contra Lohmeyer, Harrington, Hartman, Beale). However, the use of δούλος for the people of God as a whole in 2:20; 7:3; 19:2, 5; and 22:3 provides a stronger parallel. More frequently in this book it refers to the saints, and the book as a whole is addressed to the members of the seven churches. John is a “slave” not so much as a Christian prophet but as the leader of the saints addressed in the book. Therefore here and in the parallel 22:6 the saints are the “slaves”

who receive the revelation.

[6]. As Thomas (1992: 54) says, “The revelation contained in this book thus is to bring to a climax an expectation that began as early as Daniel 2. This is the ultimate detailed account of events that must (*dei*) transpire in the outworking of God’s program regarding the institution of the everlasting kingdom that will replace other earthly, temporary kingdoms.”

[7]. Walvoord (1966: 35) argues for “suddenly” on the basis of parallels in Luke 18:8; Acts 12:7; 22:18; 25:4; Rom. 16:20. However, mere parallels are insufficient in light of the evidence from the Apocalypse itself in favor of imminence.

[8]. Boring (1989: 66–67) notes two things: on the one hand, the world is not mentioned because the visions are specifically intended for the community of faith; on the other hand, the world is the intended recipient of the prophetic “testimony” of the church and so is implicitly intended as the object of the chain of revelation. This is in keeping with the Gospel of John, where the revelatory chain of God–Christ–Holy Spirit–disciples–world provides the basis for the similar chain in Revelation.

[9]. The latter would be favored by the parallel phrase “testimony of Jesus Christ,” as argued below.

[10]. Safrai (in Safrai and Stern 1974–76: 2.930; cf. 927–33). He adds that the readers were chosen by the head of the synagogue or the *hazzan*, and that they had to be qualified readers. Sometimes a distinguished rabbi or sage would read and then preach the sermon, as Jesus did in Luke 4:16–30.

[11]. There is a good chance that this is a descriptive genitive (“prophetic word”), although it is also possible that it is possessive (“this prophecy’s words”).

[12]. Vanni (1991: 348–55) goes so far as to argue that 1:4–8 is a liturgical dialogue featuring a lector (a spokesman for John) and the hearers, with the lector speaking (vv. 4–5a), the hearers responding (vv. 5b–6) followed by John (v. 7a), another response (v. 7b), and then the lector’s conclusion (v. 8).

[13]. See Schüssler Fiorenza (1985: 70–71) for an extended discussion, building on her 1972 work. She concludes that John has combined pieces of liturgical and confessional formulas, primarily baptistic in origin, to achieve his effect.

[14]. O’Rourke (1968: 409) takes this as the first of several preformed hymns in the Apocalypse (1:4, 5, 8b; 4:8b; 7:12, 15–17; 11:15, 17–18; 17:5, 6b–8) that John borrowed from early church liturgy. The debate about origin is ongoing and one can certainly say that the hymns may derive from early liturgy of the church and the synagogue (see on chaps. 4–5). But the unity of style and content in the hymns and the extent to which they contain essential threads that flow through the book as a whole would also support the thesis that they were composed for the book, indeed, that they were part of the visions John saw and heard.

[15]. As pointed out by Bauckham (1993a: 28–29) and Trudinger (1966: 87), this order could also be based on the Palestinian Targum (Pseudo-Jonathan) paraphrase of Gen. 3:14, which also emphasizes God’s present existence.

[16]. Fekkes (1994: 108–10) rejects the Isaianic reference on the grounds that there were only six qualities in the MT and too little evidence that the LXX was followed this way in the NT age. However, the frequent use of the LXX in the Apocalypse makes such a procedure likely.

[17]. The absence of the article before the title in 1:1, 2, 5 makes it likely that it is not stressing Jesus’ messianic work (normally ὁ Χριστός, *ho Christos*) but is simply part of his proper name.

[18]. Schüssler Fiorenza (1974: 224–27) argues that this is a credal list emanating from a baptismal tradition due to the high Christology and high prose. While it may be credal (though with the number of themes reflecting the book as a whole, it was more likely composed by John himself; see also n. 14 above), there is no evidence that it came from baptismal liturgy.

[19]. Some have separated the two into “the witness, the faithful one,” as in UBS⁴, but that is not as likely due to parallels in 2:13 (Antipas the “faithful witness”) and 3:14 (Jesus the “Amen, the faithful witness”). Some (Thomas 1992: 73; Beale 1999: 190) see this as an allusion to Jesus as Davidic Messiah, based on Ps. 89:37, which says the throne of David will be “established forever like the moon, and the witness in the sky is faithful.” At first glance, this does not seem likely, for it reads a lot into a quite different use of “faithful witness.” It becomes more likely, however, when we realize that Ps. 89:27 is alluded to in both the other two titles here in v. 5.

[20]. See Kraft (1974: 25–27) and Trites (1973), who note that the term has overtones of martyrdom but does not yet have that technical meaning.

[21]. The grammatical anomaly here is that John switches from participles in the first two elements of the doxology (v. 5) to a transitive verb (ἐποίησεν, *epoiēsen*). R. H. Charles (1920: 1.15) calls this a Hebraism, but it can also be attributed to the separate nature of the clauses. The first two are interconnected and soteriological, detailing Jesus’ divine love and its redemptive effects, while 1:6 describes his ecclesiological work.

[22]. Note the grammatical shift from participles in the first two elements of this threefold praise (v. 5b) to the finite verb here. Some (e.g., Swete 1911: 8) have labeled this a parenthesis, but that is unlikely in light of the critical nature of the message here. Thomas (1992: 75) notes correctly that this is a Hebraism, moving from participle to finite verb. This pattern is fairly common in Revelation (cf. 1:18; 2:2, 9, 20; 3:9; 7:14; 14:2–3; 15:3). Although Thomas accepts the view that 1:6a is a parenthesis (on the basis of αὐτῷ, *autō*, at the start of the doxology in 1:6b referring back to the two dative articular participles), I think it more likely that John uses it to change the focus from what Jesus did for us (1:5b) to what Jesus made of us (1:6a).

[23]. Brownlee (1959: 224–25) argues that John uses Mal. 2:7 and Dan. 12:3 to ascribe a priestly role to the leaders that parallels the teaching of Qumran regarding their leader-priests. However, there is no contextual marker for limiting the priestly role to the leaders here.

[24]. On the interpretation of “priest” as missionary, see Keil and Delitzsch 1968: 2.98.

[25]. He argues that while the biblical-Jewish tradition is behind the theology, the problem of the Roman ruler cult led to its use in the doxologies. It speaks of the superior sovereign power of God over all earthly forces.

[26]. Ford (1975b: 379) points out that in the early church it signified the response of the congregation to the leader’s prayer.

[27]. The present tense could be futuristic (“he is going to come”), stressing the guarantee of the coming event, but it could also be progressive, emphasizing that the process of the parousia has been set in motion. On the basis of **ΤΑΧΥ** (*tachy*, soon) in 22:7, 12, a futuristic present stressing imminence may be best. R. Scott (1958–59) believes that the Dan. 7:13 parallel means that it is Yahweh who comes rather than Christ, but that does not fit the context here. Beale (1999: 198) states that this refers to the process of Christ “coming” in judgment throughout the church age, culminating in his second coming. However, that does not fit the imagery of Christ “coming in the clouds” here.

[28]. Longman (1982: 297–300), contra R. Scott (1958–59: 127–29), who believes these are the heavenly clouds surrounding the throne. That is not part of the throne room vision in chap. 4, however, and in the other places “clouds” are mentioned (10:1; 11:12; 14:14–16) they are not part of the throne room. Longman (294–97) points to the OT pictures of Yahweh as the “rider on the clouds” (Ps. 18:9–15; 104:1–4; Dan. 7:13).

[29]. In the third line of the verse we have an intensive **καί**, thus meaning “even those who . . .”

[30]. This is likely because the Zech. 12:10 reference is used of mourning for sin (i.e., repentance) in its original context and yet has also a judgment context here in Revelation (see further below). This can also be demonstrated by a study of **ἱουαῖ** (*phylai*) for “the peoples/tribes (of the earth)” in Revelation. In 5:9 they are “purchased with his blood,” and in 7:9 they are part of the “great multitude” in heaven (the first reference to the conversion of the nations in the book). At the same time, in 11:9–10 and 13:7 they are the “earth-dwellers” who rejoice in the death of the two witnesses and follow the beast. In 14:6–7 they are given a final opportunity to repent, but in 16:9, 11 they reject God’s offer. In conclusion, the “peoples” and “nations” of the earth are the subject of Christ’s salvific love and many respond (7:9, 15:4; etc.), but the “nations” as a whole reject Christ and follow the beast.

[31]. While some (Walvoord 1966: 40; perhaps Caird 1966: 19) have argued that this is Christ rather than the Father (due to the centrality of Christ in the context), the use of OT designations for God (“LORD God of Hosts” was a favorite OT title) and the repetition of the title for God in v. 4 make it more likely this refers to God the Father.

[32]. Caird (1966: 15) sees this as a reference to seven stars or planets in pagan mythology, paralleling coins in Domitian’s reign portraying his dead child/heir as an infant Zeus playing among the stars. In this sense John would have been providing further opposition to emperor worship, one of the major emphases in his book, as we will see. Again, while this is possible, it involves too much speculation.

[33]. Talbert (1994: 14) believes that this is “a primitive Christian pneumatology” similar to that in Hermas and the Ascension of Isaiah in which the phrase “seven spirits” refers to the Holy Spirit but is expressed in the language of angelic beings in order to depict the Holy Spirit as the prophetic spirit of God.

[34]. See the discussions in Schüssler Fiorenza 1972: 185–92; and Swete 1911: 9.

A. Inaugural Vision (1:9–20)

[1]. Thomas (1992: 84–85) points out how the grammatical combination **ΚΟΜΩΝΟΙ ΕΝ** also occurs in Matt. 23:30 and Gal. 6:6 and is a key element of NT teaching on discipleship (1 Thess. 1:6; 2 Cor. 1:7; Phil. 3:10; 1 Pet. 2:21; 4:13; 5:1). It connotes the idea of “sharing in” the life of Christ and of Christian leaders who provide us with examples.

[2]. The one difference with v. 2 is that **Ἰησοῦ** here is more likely an objective (John testifying about Jesus) than a subjective (Jesus testifying) genitive as in 1:2. Yet the link between the two is obvious, and it is not so easy to take these as opposite expressions. It may well be that this is a general genitive, stating that John’s witness results from the impact of Jesus’ witness (as in 12:17). However, the primary thrust here is objective, confirmed by the parallel in 6:9 (“the testimony they maintained”) and 20:4 (“their testimony about Jesus”) as well as in 19:10, where it appears by itself and is also an objective genitive.

[3]. As in 1:9, John uses **ἐγενόμην** rather than **ἦν** (*ēn*, was). While there could possibly be some significance (Thomas 1992: 89 says, “John follows his note about a geographical change of location [*egenomēn*, 1:9] with a word about another kind of change [*ἐγενόμην* (*egenomēn*, ‘I came to be’), 1:10]),” it is more likely that there is no special meaning, and that it means simply “was.” The two verbs are often synonyms, and the context does not yield such an emphasis as “came to be.”

[4]. De Smidt 1994: 239–41 agrees and adds that “in the Spirit” has several aspects: psychological (spiritual control as the agent of revelation), literary (a transformation symbol for a new reality), rhetorical (to convince the readers of the validity of the prophetic message), theological (interpreting the crisis via the history and reign of Christ), liturgical (receiving it on the Lord’s Day), and eschatological (the outpouring of the Spirit in the last days).

[5]. For the metaphorical thrust of this verb, see BAGD 301; Légasse, *EDNT* 2:40.

[6]. The imperfect **ἐλάλει** is dramatic, picturing the voice “speaking” to John. The use of **μετά** is more common in Revelation than elsewhere (4:1; 10:8; 17:1; 21:9, 15; elsewhere Mark 6:50; John 4:27 [twice]; 9:37; 14:30) and is virtually equivalent to **πρός**.

[7]. Contra Charlesworth (1986), who argues that the “voice” in intertestamental apocalyptic stands for a heavenly being that speaks for God. This is possible, but Aune (1997: 88) shows that there is little evidence for such in first-century Judaism, and the identification of the being as “like a son of man” in v. 13 and the titles used in vv. 17–18 (“the First and the Last . . . dead, and behold I am alive . . .”) identify the “voice” clearly as Christ.

[8]. Normally even in Revelation **ὁμοιον** (*homoion*) is followed by the dative; cf. 1:15; 2:18; 4:3, 6; et al. Only here and in the same phrase in 14:14 is it followed by the accusative, probably because it is a direct allusion to Dan. 7:13 LXX. As Thomas (1992: 98) points out, it is virtually equivalent to **ὡς** (*hōs*, like) in meaning and construction.

[9]. But not his immutability, preexistence, or sinlessness, as many have tried to interpret this passage. That is to go beyond the imagery.

[10]. Therefore, those who utilize the Roman short sword (which resembled a tongue) as a reason why this is pictured as “coming out of the mouth” miss the metaphor. It certainly appears in the metaphor as a tongue, but the grotesque imagery of so

huge a “tongue” flowing out of the mouth is deliberate.

[11]. The present imperative with μή could well indicate an existing condition that must “stop” (see N. Turner 1963: 76; esp. BDF §336, who translates μή ἰοβοῦ “don’t be afraid [as you just were]”). While many grammarians doubt that this is a viable use of a present prohibition, arguing that it simply means they should not continue to fear in the future (rather than stop what they had been doing), certain contexts contain an emphasis on a preexisting condition. That John had just “fallen at his feet as though dead” provides such a context.

[12]. The grammar of this clause is interesting. First is the switch from adjective (νεκρός) to participle (ζῶν); second is the switch from ἐγενόμην (egenomēn, I was) to εἰμι (eimi, I am). In both cases the switch is stylistic and without change of meaning, although some try to see significance in ἐγενόμην as connoting a historical event, “came to be dead,” in contrast to his eternal life now (so Swete, Moffatt, Thomas). However, this idea is expressed by the switch from past to present tense rather than by the change in the verb roots.

[13]. Though see Jeremias (TDNT 3:746), who believes the genitive is not objective, “the keys to death and Hades,” but possessive, “the keys of (personified) death and Hades” (see TDNT 3:744–53).

[14]. Van Unnik (1962–63: 92–93) sees this “common prophetic formula” exemplified in Jewish (Philo), Gentile (the Stoics), and Christian (the Apocryphon of John) circles.

1. Letter to Ephesus (2:1–7)

[1]. On the city of Ephesus, see Oster, ABD 2:542–49; Arnold, DPL 249–53; Mounce 1998: 66–67; Krodel 1989: 104–5; Aune 1997: 136–41.

[2]. See the excellent discussion by Hemer 1986: 82–84. Ramsay (HDB 3:750–51) argued that Pergamum was the capital until Hadrian made Ephesus capital in A.D. 129, while others have argued for Ephesus. However, first-century writers (e.g., Strabo, Pliny) give Pergamum greater importance. Hemer concludes correctly that the evidence is indecisive, and Rome may have allowed such rivalry (Smyrna also fought for prominence) to keep any city from growing too powerful. Aune (1997: 136) says Ephesus and Smyrna were the greater natural rivals, which is indeed possible due to their proximity and the fact that they were both harbor cities.

[3]. See Hemer’s (1986: 36–39) extensive discussion of the privileges of Jews in Ephesus (including citizenship). He also discusses the acrimony between Jew and Gentile in the city (as attested in Acts 19), with the Jews looking to Rome for maintaining their privileges.

[4]. The genitive τῆς ἐκκλησίας (tēs ekklesiās, of the church) is less likely possessive (“the church’s angel”) than objective (“angel to the church”).

[5]. As BAGD 553 points out, this formula was used by Persian kings as well as OT prophets in authoritative decrees, meaning “this is what . . . says.” Muse (1986: 147–61) believes this formula shows that the seven letters are primarily prophetic in nature, with two salvific prophecies (Smyrna and Philadelphia) and five warning prophecies (the rest). Beale (1999: 229) points out that the formula occurs 21 times of Yahweh in the Minor Prophets (12 in Zechariah) and thus means Christ is assuming the role of Yahweh in addressing the churches.

[6]. Interestingly, the four times γινώσκω is used in Revelation (2:23, 24; 3:3, 9) are also in this section, but none has Christ as the subject. Also, when the two words are used with humankind as subject, the classical distinction does not seem to be observed.

[7]. Here the pronoun σου links the two nouns, though in two early witnesses, Sinaiticus and the Byzantine family, σου is repeated after κόπον as well.

[8]. The aorist tense of this verb is probably to be taken in a global sense referring to repeated “testings” of these false teachers in the past.

[9]. Often, δοκιμάζω has a more positive thrust of “test in order to approve,” while πειράζω has a more negative connotation of a critical “test in order to ascertain truth.” In 1 John 4:1–3, however, the term is used in a more critical way. See 2 Cor. 13:5, where the two are used synonymously, and 1 Tim. 3:10, where δοκιμάζω is used of a critical “testing” of deacons to make sure there is “nothing against them.”

[10]. There have been several theories as to who they were: Judaizers from Jerusalem (as in Galatians or 2 Corinthians), itinerant teachers and evangelists (Beckwith 1919: 449), a Pauline libertarian party (the Tübingen school, Hemer 1986: 40), general teachers who opposed John (Lenski 1963: 85), or the Nicolaitans of 2:6, 14. This last option is accepted by the vast majority of scholars and best fits the context (see Mounce, Thomas, Aune).

[11]. Zerwick 1963: 130 §375 notes the tendency in the Book of Revelation to follow a participle with a coordinate finite verb (see also 2:9, 20; 3:7, 9; etc.), borrowing the modality of the participle.

[12]. Note that John also used the present participle λέγοντας (legontas, saying) for their claim to be apostles in the previous phrase. This probably indicates that their claim was also continuing in the present.

[13]. The aorist tense of εὑρες (heures, found) shows that it is parallel to “tested,” referring to the process by which they discovered this truth.

[14]. Some scholars have tried to limit the reference in 2:3 to one or the other (i.e., persecution or false teaching) but it is more likely general, a reference to both. The expanded form of 2:3 makes it doubtful that it should be restricted to the false teachers of 2:2. Elsewhere in Revelation “endurance” refers to bearing up under suffering at the hands of the enemies of God.

[15]. In an interesting departure from this debate, Beale (1999: 230–31) says it was not so much a failure of love for God or Jesus but a failure to express that love “by witnessing to him in the world.” However, his primary evidence is a link with Matt. 24:12–14 (where “the gospel of the kingdom will be preached” immediately follows “the love of most will grow cold”) and the “lampstand”

in v. 5 (seen as a symbol of their responsibility to be “light bearers”). But here the lampstand is more a symbol of their being a church (1:20). While the “witness” of the church is certainly emphasized in Revelation (cf. 1:9; 6:9; 11:7; 12:11, 17; 19:10; 20:4), there is too little evidence that this is the emphasis here.

[16]. C. Brown (*NIDNTT* 3:238) corrects Childs by noting that the past event (e.g., the exodus) does not become present through actualization. Rather, it points us to the fact that the same Yahweh who was present then is also present today. In other words, it becomes a basis for “appeal to Yahweh in prayer.”

[17]. The imagery of a “tremendous height” or “high cliff of love” so often adduced is interesting but does not stem from the Greek.

[18]. This is a case where the foreground/background concept in aspect theory does not quite work. The command to “remember” is not the “foreground” or important part with the aorist “repent” and “do” comprising the “supporting illustrative material” (Porter 1994: 302) in the exposition. Rather, the ongoing action in “remembering” leads to repeated acts of repentance (always aorist except for 2:22, where the future with ἔαν μή is equivalent to an aorist subjunctive). The aorist imperatives build on and function within the action of the present imperative.

[19]. There is considerable debate regarding 2:16, where Pergamum is warned that Christ will “come quickly” and fight “against them with the sword of [his] mouth.” However, even Mounce (1998: 82) sees the earthly judgment in 2:16 as a parousia saying. Also, in 1:4, 8 it is part of the title of God—“who is, and who was, and who is to come”—but this title is peculiar to the Apocalypse and “is to come” certainly refers to the eschaton, when Christ returns to bring history to a close.

[20]. Many (e.g., Swete, Lenski, Thomas) take this as a futuristic present, and indeed it often has that force in Revelation. Even if we take that approach, however, the sense of imminence is highlighted in the switch from present to future verbs.

[21]. P. Hughes (1990: 37) has an interesting interpretation of ἐκ τοῦ τόπου αὐτῆς (*ek tou topou autēs*, from its place), saying it does not just mean the loss of the Ephesian church but the transferal of its “light” to another locality that will be faithful to Christ. He concludes, “God’s work continues, however, and he will raise up other churches to shed forth the light of his truth.” It is difficult to prove that we can read this much into “from its place,” but the truth of Hughes’s comment remains.

[22]. For gnostic aspects in the Nicolaitan movement, see Schüssler Fiorenza (1973: 565–81) and Prigent (1977: 1–22). But the only evidence for Gnosticism is “Satan’s so-called deep secrets” in 2:24, and it is best to be cautious about so-called gnostic leanings in the movement.

[23]. Several scholars (Kraft, Caird, Aune, Beale) believe the immorality in 2:14, 20 is metaphorical for idolatry as unfaithfulness to God rather than literal for sexual sin. But there is too little reason to assume that these people were not engaging in the same type of syncretism on the sexual side that they were practicing on the religious side. “Immorality” is emphasized throughout the book (2:14, 20–21; 9:21; 14:8; 17:2, 4; 18:3, 9; 19:2; 21:8; 22:15). It carries a double meaning, stressing both physical and spiritual unfaithfulness (see on 2:14, 20; contra Beale 1999: 250, who says it is physical only in 9:21; 21:8; 22:15). I do not find helpful a radical dichotomy between physical and spiritual “adultery” in passages like 14:8; 17:2, 4; 18:3, 9; 19:2.

[24]. The present participle ἔχων (*echōn*, having) plus the present tense λέγει (*legei*, says) highlight the current activity of the Spirit in convicting the church of these truths.

[25]. Δώσω is followed by an infinitive here and in 3:21. With the infinitive it means to “grant” someone the right or privilege to share in a thing (see BAGD 193).

[26]. The source of the authority in chap. 13 is debated, since in 13:2, 4 it is the dragon that “gives” the beast his authority. As I argue in that section, however, the final authority there is God’s, so there is a double meaning. The dragon and the beast can only do what God allows, and the ultimate authority is his alone.

[27]. Hemer (1986: 50–52) finds a further contrast in that the Ephesian temple served as a place of refuge for criminals, while 2:4–5 demand repentance for sin. In other words, Ephesus provided asylum for evil people while God’s paradise provided refuge for repentant people. Hemer’s case here is less likely than on the “tree of life,” but it is intriguing.

[28]. Here NIV inserts “service in,” which is not in the Greek text.

2. Letter to Smyrna (2:8–11)

[1]. For more on Smyrna, see Potter, *ABD* 6:73–75; R. North, *ISBE* 4:555–56; as well as Mounce, Krodel, Thomas, and Hemer.

[2]. The distinction between πτωχεῖα (no possessions at all) and πένης (lacking anything superfluous) made by Trench (1880: 129) and accepted by Thomas (1992: 163) and Mounce (1998: 74) is not emphasized in the NT. It is true that in secular Greek the first refers to one with absolutely nothing, reduced to begging, while the second refers to lack of possessions beyond the necessities. However, the NT does not develop the contrast. Πένης occurs only in 1 Cor. 9:9 and that in a quotation from the LXX. The NT writers make no such distinction. The term here and elsewhere simply means “poverty.”

[3]. Both the ἀλλά (*alla*, but) phrases in 2:9 are parenthetical clarifications of the true status of the Christians (“but you are actually rich”) and the Jews (“but they are actually the synagogue of Satan”). In the world their status is reversed, but their status before God is here made clear.

[4]. While most commentators assume these are Jewish people, Michaels (1997: 74) does not, stating that they are actually Gentile Christians who converted to Judaism in order to avoid Roman persecution (the Romans looked favorably upon Jews but not Christians). He argues that we should take the phrase “say they are Jews and are not” more literally. This is a viable interpretation but needs more proof. The evidence for anti-Christian Jews in Smyrna makes the traditional understanding the more probable view.

[5]. Le Grys (1992: 79) gives the unlikely interpretation that the “synagogue of Satan” refers to the Nicolaitans, the primary opponents (on the grounds of his thesis that the book deals primarily with an internal dispute in the church). The Jewish context

here and in 3:9 makes this quite doubtful.

[6]. See the note on 1:17 for this translation.

[7]. While **ΤΙΝΟΣ** (*tinós*, some) is not found here, many (e.g., Beckwith, Hemer, Thomas) have noted that **ΕΞ** (*ex*, of) can often stand for “some of” and is a construction frequent in Johannine writings (e.g., John 6:39, 64; 2 John 4).

[8]. The force of the genitive **ἡμερῶν** should be translated as “for” or “during” (genitive of time), indicating a period of “time within which” (cf. BDF §186; N. Turner 1963: 235).

[9]. For discussion of the “I will give” formula in the seven letters, see 2:7b.

[10]. **Τῆς ζωῆς** here is almost certainly an exegetical genitive, “the crown consisting of life.”

[11]. Note the emphatic future negative, **οὐ μὴ** (*ou mē*, never) plus the aorist subjunctive. While the extent of the emphasis is debated (see Zerwick 1963: §444), in this case it definitely means “never.” This construction occurs sixteen times in the book, nearly always with emphatic force.

3. Letter to Pergamum (2:12–17)

[1]. On Pergamum see Potter, *ABD* 5:228–30; North, *ISBE* 3:768–70; as well as Mounce, Morris, Thomas, Krodel, and Hemer.

[2]. The use of **τῆν** (*tēn*, the) is probably anaphoric (article of previous reference), referring back to 1:16.

[3]. Some manuscripts (including TR) add “your deeds” in assimilation to 2:2, etc. However, none of the older manuscripts does so, and it is unlikely.

[4]. I agree with Thomas (1992: 182) that **τοῦ Σατανᾶ** is a subjective genitive (“where Satan is enthroned”) rather than a possessive (“Satan’s throne”). While technically “throne” is not a verbal noun, an active force makes more sense in this context.

[5]. Hemer (1986: 86) makes a good case for taking **μου** as an objective genitive rather than a possessive, thus, “who has witnessed to me and been faithful to me.”

[6]. Some (e.g., R. Charles 1920: 1.62) say that the plural may be generic, referring to only one thing for emphasis.

[7]. Thomas (1992: 188 n. 38) argues that **ὅτι** (*hoti*) is causal (“because”), not exegetical (“that”), since the latter is normally found in indirect discourse rather than appositional situations. However, **ὅτι** is often used as a simple noun clause (see Zerwick 1963: §§419–22) and even more frequently in indirect discourse. It occurs often in the seven letters (e.g., 2:4, 14, 20) to describe the contents of the weaknesses of the churches. It more likely means “that” and is a type of indirect discourse: “I have a few things against you; let me tell you what they are: that you have. . . .”

[8]. Some scholars (e.g., Hemer, Krodel, Thomas) see etymological significance, arguing that “Balaam” was a term the cult members themselves used, and that both “Balaam” and “Nicolaus” mean “conqueror of the people.” This would explain the close comparison of the two in vv. 14–15.

[9]. The imperfect is used dramatically to picture the ongoing “teaching” by which Balaam gave Balak the key to defeat the Israelites.

[10]. Hemer (1986: 91) notes that the same two sins are present in Thyatira (2:20) but the order is reversed. He makes a good case that this is due to the different situations. In Pergamum, with its strong emperor cult, idolatry would be the major problem. In Thyatira, with the strength of its guilds, immorality was the greater difficulty (see below).

[11]. Later copyists responded to this awkwardness either by changing the final term to **ὁ μισῶ** or by adding **ὁ μισῶ**. Neither, however, is likely; they are an assimilation to 2:6.

[12]. Note that the imperative is singular rather than plural, because the letter is addressed to the “angel” at Pergamum. Also, the aorist is the basic tense used in commands given in specific situations and should not be given any special force (see BDF §335; and N. Turner 1963: 74).

[13]. **ΜΕΤΑ** (*meta*, with) is normal with verbs of fighting “against” someone (BAGD 509.3.a).

[14]. R. Charles (1920: 1.65) calls this the only example in the NT of a partitive genitive following **δίδωμι** (*didōmi*, I give). While this may be true, it is also common in Revelation to assume the presence of **ΤΙΝΕΣ** (*tines*, some [of]), and that is the case here.

[15]. Hemer (1986: 96) argues that the “whiteness” of it is not a major issue. However, I agree with those who see a theological purpose in it. “White” in Revelation symbolizes purity, a triumphant faith in Christ, and the heavenly glory awaiting the overcomers. It is used often for the radiance of God (20:11) and Christ (1:14; 14:14; 19:11) as well as garments of the saints washed in the blood of the Lamb (7:13, 14) and given to the saints after victorious perseverance (3:4–5; 6:11; 7:9; 19:14). Here it probably signifies both purity and victory.

[16]. So Fekkes (1994: 128–29), contra Beale (1999: 257–58), who says knowing the “new name” of Christ, we have access to his character and power.

4. Letter to Thyatira (2:18–29)

[1]. On Thyatira see North, *ISBE* 4:846; also Hemer, Mounce, Krodel, Thomas, and Aune.

[2]. Duff’s further thesis, that this is an indictment of Jezebel for indulging in witchcraft, is too speculative and has no basis in the details of the text.

[3]. Beckwith (1919: 465) and Thomas (1992: 210) believe that there is an ABA’B’ pattern, with service the outgrowth of love and endurance the outgrowth of faith. This makes sense, but there is no evidence for it in the context. There is a definite connection between faith and endurance in Revelation, but no link between love and service. Therefore, this pattern must remain only an intriguing possibility.

[4]. These should properly be called exegetical uses of **καί**—“I know your works, namely, your love and faith and service and endurance.”

[5]. **Καί** (*kai*, and) could have ascensive force, “Indeed, your last works are greater than the first.”

[6]. Duff (1997: 116–33) believes she was a sorceress, and her community was a “witchcraft society” engaging in Hellenistic magic. The problem is that the language here does not support that. “Sorcery” is certainly a problem in the Apocalypse (see 9:21; 18:23; 21:8; 22:15), but no specific evidence links this with Thyatira.

[7]. For instance, Caird (1966: 44), who believes there was no immorality with the original Jezebel and therefore the “immorality” here was spiritual as well. Aune (1997: 204) takes “fornications” as meaning “apostasy” rather than sexual sin.

[8]. The use of the possessive genitive **ἐμός** (*emos*, my) rather than the pronoun **μου** (*mou*, my) may place emphasis on the person possessing the thing (here God), but BDF §285 argues that this force was disappearing in the Koine period, and the two may be indistinguishable.

[9]. In the NT the typical Hellenistic use of this term for a span or duration of time is generally followed (Hübner, *EDNT* 3:488). Thus here Jezebel is given a certain period of time to repent.

[10]. This is most likely a prophetic present, “going to cast,” emphasizing the certainty of the coming judgment.

[11]. The switch from **πορνεία** (*porneia*, adultery) at the end of 2:21 to **μοιχεύω** (*moicheuō*, commit adultery) here is probably stylistic. On the whole the first term is the more general, speaking of illicit sexual acts, while the second is specific of marital unfaithfulness (see BAGD 693). However, both terms are used in a figurative sense of spiritual (idolatry) and sexual unfaithfulness, and that is how they are used in 2:21–22.

[12]. Interestingly, the technical use of “the great tribulation” to mean the final series of woes experienced by God’s people just before the eschaton occurs only in 7:14 (and perhaps Matt. 24:21, though there it is probably more general) in the NT. The other times **θλίψις** occurs in the book (1:9; 2:9, 10, 22) it refers simply to suffering or affliction.

[13]. The use of the cognate accusative could also be meant emphatically, “will surely kill.” However, the parallels with Ezekiel and Rev. 6:8 as well as the context favor “will kill with a plague.”

[14]. The use of the plural “your” is quite significant, because elsewhere the second singular is used in accordance with the angel addressed in 2:18–19. By switching to the plural, the text makes the message far more direct and personal.

[15]. The two clauses are introduced by the pronouns **ὅσοι** and **οἵτινες**, which can have the separate meanings “all who” and “whoever,” respectively, but in this context are probably synonymous and equivalent simply to “who.” See N. Turner 1963: 47 on the confusion between these pronouns.

[16]. Instead of the dative **τῷ νίκοντι δώσω** (*tō nikonti dōsō*, I will give to the one who overcomes) as in 2:7 and 2:17, the text here has the parallel **ὁ νικῶν . . . δώσω αὐτῷ** (*ho nikōn . . . dōsō autō*, the one who overcomes . . . I will give to). The meaning is the same. A major reason for the change is again the close connection between 2:25 and 2:26. The absolute nominative **ὁ νικῶν** parallels **ὁ ἔχων** (*ho echōn*, who holds firm) in 2:25. The one who holds God’s truths firm is the overcomer.

[17]. This is another expegetical **καί** (*kai*, and), “the one who overcomes, namely the one who keeps. . . .”

[18]. Psalms of Solomon 17:24–25 (first century B.C.) interprets this psalm of the messianic “son of David”: “He will destroy the pride of the sinners like a potter’s vessel. He will break all their substance in pieces with a rod of iron.”

[19]. I take 2:26c (“I will give authority over the nations”) as part of the paraphrase rather than as introducing the paraphrase (contra NIV), because the parallels with Ps. 2:8a are so strong.

[20]. It is difficult to know how much force to give to the anarthrous **ἐξουσίαν** here. R. Charles (1920: 1.75) postulates that the anarthrous form has limited authority and the articular full authority, but Hemer (1986: 252 n. 68) notes correctly that this is unwarranted in light of 9:10; 22:14; and perhaps 11:6. More likely the anarthrous form stresses the qualitative or theological aspect of sharing the Messiah’s “authority.”

[21]. This use of **ἐπί** (*epi*, over) for authority or rule “over” is common, as in 5:10 (“rule over the earth”) and 17:18 (the harlot Babylon “rules over the kings of the earth”).

[22]. The strongest argument is given by Hemer (1986: 124–25). He states that the promise is given with respect to the pagans in Thyatira to whom the “church is now in helpless subjection,” and that therefore the idea of “dominion” has precedence over “destroy.” He takes the “rod of iron” as parallel to the “sword” of Pergamum and as a “symbol of authority.” However, the “sword” connoted the right to execute enemies of the state, and the parallel with 19:15 (where Ps. 2:9 is quoted with respect to the final war) is conclusive.

[23]. This is one of five times in Revelation that God is called the “Father” of Jesus (1:6; 2:28; 3:5, 21; 14:1, which are the only occurrences of **πατήρ** [*patēr*, father] in the book).

[24]. Thomas (1992: 235) argues, “The proposal loses its plausibility, however, in light of the strong disdain for heathen idolatry expressed earlier in the message. Christ would hardly draw His symbolism from heathen thought.” However, we have already seen a great deal of symbolism from the “heathen” world in this book. It is not the idolatrous aspect but the symbolic aspect that is behind the use of this. The principle is similar to Ps. 68:4, where Yahweh uses the Baal title “rider on the clouds” of himself. There as well as here the purpose is eschatological and evangelistic. God/Christ is saying, “What you worship can only come true in myself.”

5. Letter to Sardis (3:1–6)

[1]. On Sardis see Ramsay, Hemer, Ford, Johnson, Mounce, Thomas, and Aune.

[2]. Hemer (1986: 143) follows several (e.g., Swete 1911: 48; Beckwith 1919: 473) who allude to Herodotus 7.138 in taking “name” here to mean “reputation” (contra v. 4, where **ὄνομα** refers to the “name” in the book of life).

[3]. For the Semitic use of **καί** (*kai*, and) as an adversative, “but,” see Zerwick 1963: §455.β.

[4]. The text switches from the verb **ζῆς** (*zēs*, you live) to a noun, **νεκρός** (*nekros*, dead), perhaps to contrast their claim (the verb)

with the reality (the noun). They acted like they were alive, but they had nothing but death.

[5]. Several (Hort, Hemer, Thomas) argue for the somewhat rare meaning, “that which survives,” for τὰ λοιπά, as paralleled in Rev. 8:13; 9:20; 11:13. This is likely and fits the context well.

[6]. BDF §337 states that the ingressive is especially used to “express the coming about of conduct which contrasts with prior conduct.”

[7]. Beale (1999: 273) takes this as equivalent to a progressive perfect, “which have been about to die.” The plural form of the verb (a neuter plural subject normally takes a singular verb) emphasizes the individuals who were about to die.

[8]. As Swete (1911: 50) points out, the perfect tense may mean “the search was not yet ended.”

[9]. The aorist subjunctive γρηγορήσης has no special force. Most admit that the aorist is the basic tense in this type of clause, and the force of the tense is to be inferred from the context. In this case it is global, summarizing a constant state of vigilance.

[10]. Some (Alford, Lenski, Beasley-Murray, Beale) have taken this not of final judgment but of present judgment on the church. They argue that elsewhere (2:5, 16) parousia language is used for present judgment. By contrast, Thomas (1992: 253) argues that in the other passages the consequences are explicitly stated. The absence of that here makes it more likely that this is final judgment. The solution is probably in between, via Beale’s use of inaugurated eschatology. Christ is “coming like a thief” in present judgment, and that is a harbinger of the final coming in judgment.

[11]. Hemer (1986: 145–46) responds to those (R. Charles 1920: 1.88; Moffatt 1961: 448) who transpose 16:15 and place it between 3:3a and 3:3b on the grounds that it is out of place in chap. 16. He points out that there is no textual warrant and that chap. 16 already points back to Sardis in 2:26 of its details, so it is in its proper place where it stands.

[12]. The language ἥξω ἐπὶ σέ (*hēxō epī se*, I will come upon you) is deliberate. In a spatial sense when ἦκω has the idea of “coming to,” it normally uses πρὸς (*pros*, to; e.g., John 6:37). However, in eschatological passages where the kingdom or judgment is descending “upon,” it is usually followed by ἐπὶ (e.g., Matt. 23:36; Luke 19:43).

[13]. Ποῖος in both direct and indirect questions often has the same force as τίς (*tis*, what); cf. Matt. 22:36; John 10:32; Acts 23:34 (BAGD 684).

[14]. Nearly all commentators recognize a further use of ὄνομα (*onoma*, name) here to signify “person” or “individual.” Yet it is probably also a further contrast with the unfaithful majority, described in 3:1 as those who “have a name ‘Alive’ but are actually ‘Dead.’” In 3:4–5 it is better to “have a name” called “Conqueror.”

[15]. Some (e.g., Sweet, Aune) also appeal to the Jewish curse against heretics introduced into synagogue liturgy in the 80s, “May the Nazarenes and the *minim* [i.e., heretics] perish suddenly and be blotted out from the book of life.” In light of the powerful Jewish faction at Sardis, the reference here could refer to Christians who were troubled by the invocation of this curse by Jewish neighbors, and this could be a word of encouragement that Christ would never do so. While this is attractive, there is no corroborative evidence of Jewish attacks against the Sardian Christians in the text, as there is in the letters to Smyrna and Philadelphia. Therefore, it must remain conjectural.

[16]. Contra Swete (1911: 52), who comments on the absence of the negative form of the saying, “Even in the message to Sardis the last note is one of unmixed encouragement and hope.” It is more likely that there is an implicit warning in all three of the promises in 3:5.

6. Letter to Philadelphia (3:7–13)

[1]. Hemer (1986: 155) notes several incidents that led to Attalus being called “lover of his brother.” There were four boys, all devoted to their mother, Apollonius, and to each other. Two incidents especially showed the close-knit relationship. In 172 B.C. a false rumor arose that Eumenes had been assassinated, and Attalus took the crown. Upon his brother’s return, however, all was forgiven and Attalus relinquished the crown to his brother. Then in 168/167 B.C., the Romans pressured Attalus to remove his brother and assume the kingship, but he repeatedly refused. He did not become king until his brother’s death in 159 B.C.

[2]. On Philadelphia see Gasque, ABD 5:304–5; as well as Ramsay, Hemer, Mounce, Johnson, Thomas, and Aune.

[3]. “The Holy One” is often used of Christ in the NT (Mark 1:24; Luke 1:35; John 6:69; Acts 3:14; 1 John 2:20). It shows the divine origins of Christ, that he is one with Yahweh.

[4]. Fekkes (1994: 131) says only Tg. Isa. 22:20–25 may do so, and that depends on its dating, but even the wording of the MT lends itself to a messianic interpretation.

[5]. Interestingly, the characteristic dative following δέδωκα is not found here. Instead, we have ἐνώπιόν σου (*enōpion sou*, before you), repeating the preposition used three times in 3:2, 5 to refer to God and his angels. It is possible that this unusual preposition here is intended to recall those earlier uses and to enhance the eschatological thrust here. There God was on the throne as judge; here God/Christ is on the throne as giver. At the same time, while the parallels with 3:2, 5 are likely, ἐνώπιον is also occasioned by the secondary meaning of δέδωκα employed here, “I have placed before you.”

[6]. The ἦν . . . αὐτήν (*hēn . . . autēn*, which . . . it) construction is a good example of the pleonastic use of the personal pronoun to repeat the relative. Zerwick (1963: §§201–3) points out it is a Semitism and is restricted primarily to Mark and Revelation.

[7]. Hemer (1986: 162) argues for double meaning here, both “the key to the kingdom” and missionary success. He gives three reasons for a “stimulus to evangelism” perspective: (1) since this sentence is a parenthesis, it must apply to the present situation and not just to future glory; (2) since the attributes of Christ apply to the current setting, a missionary interpretation cannot be excluded; (3) the Philadelphia church may have understood it this way on the basis of v. 9. This is viable, but on the basis of the immediate context and application of the Isaianic quote, it must remain only a conjectural possibility.

[8]. As stated above, ὅτι (*hoti*, that) is used (as in 2:2; 3:1, 15) to describe the “works.” There are two ways to detail the works in the seven letters, a ὅτι clause or a series of appositional nouns (as in 2:9, 19).

[9]. As R. Charles (1920: 1.87) points out, this is an adversative use of καί (kai, and).

[10]. This is also favored by the aorist ἠγάπησα (ēgapēsa, I have loved) in 3:9, which could hardly be a past act.

[11]. Note that μου (mou, my) frames the two nouns, “word” and “name.” Both are possessives and emphasize that Jesus is sovereign in the church.

[12]. Διδῶ is probably a futuristic present (“I am going to make”) in light of the future ποιήσω that parallels it in the next clause. BDF §392e points out that δίδοναι with an accusative and infinitive (supplied by the second clause and paralleled by ποιήσω [also mentioned there by BDF]) means to “cause” or “make” someone to do a thing.

[13]. As in 2:9 this is a partitive ἐκ, “of.”

[14]. Two interesting grammatical points need explaining. First, the ἵνα clause is equivalent to an infinitive here and functions as the complement to ποιήσω, “make them to come” (this is very common in Revelation). Second, the ἵνα is followed by the future indicative rather than the aorist subjunctive, somewhat unusual but not uncommon (for other passages in Revelation, see 6:4, 11; 8:3; 9:5; 13:12; 14:13). Here it fits the future tense main verb “will make” and continues that force.

[15]. Fekkes (1994: 134–35) believes John conflates Isa. 49:23 and 60:14 in order “to draw a line from the oppressed community of Isaiah to the struggling saints in Philadelphia.”

[16]. It is important to realize that this is not anti-Semitism. The Jewish people, as in the Gospel of John, are now part of the world due to their unbelief and rejection of the true Messiah. Thus they will experience judgment, but elsewhere in Revelation as part of “the nations” many of them will also experience conversion.

[17]. However, it could also be a culminative aorist, stressing the present results of their faithful endurance.

[18]. Throughout the book it is always a question whether “word of” leads into a subjective genitive (“word of their testimony,” 12:11), genitive of source (“word of God,” 1:2), descriptive genitive (“prophetic word,” 1:3), or some such. In this context an objective genitive makes best sense, “the teaching about Christ’s endurance.”

[19]. The use of καὶ γὰρ (kagō, I also) strengthens the connection between the Philadelphians’ “keeping” and Christ’s “keeping” here. Christ does his part on the basis of the Philadelphians who have done their part.

[20]. There are two items of importance. First, ὥρα does not refer to a period of time but to an event. It is “the time when God will try” the earth. Second, the genitive τοῦ πειρασμοῦ is either exegetical, “the time characterized by trial,” or objective, “time when God will try.” The latter may be slightly better. Brown (1966: 310) argues that we should not translate this “hour of trial” but “hour of affliction” (with divine judgment).

[21]. On the basis of the “testing,” which is used often of Christians elsewhere in the NT, and “whole world,” Beckwith (1919: 483) argues that these are Christians as well as non-Christians. However, he does not trace these phrases through the book, where they always refer to pagans.

[22]. This does not mean that the pretribulation position is necessarily wrong, only that Rev. 3:10 cannot be used in favor of this position.

[23]. Note that ἔρχομαι (erchomai, I am coming) is the same verb as the one used in 3:10 (“about to come”). There is the same relationship here as in 1 Thess. 4:13–5:10, with one and the same “coming” of Christ entailing judgment for the unbeliever (v. 10 = 1 Thess. 5:1–10) and reward for the believer (v. 11 = 1 Thess. 4:13–18).

[24]. The emphasis in ταχύ is on imminence, not swiftness. This does not mean Christ is coming “quickly” but “very soon” (as in 1:7; 22:7).

[25]. Note the asyndeton (absence of a connecting conjunction) to emphasize the close relationship of the two ideas.

[26]. Hemer (1986: 267 n. 51) notes three inscriptions that show the importance of the games for the city of Philadelphia, speculating that the three different sets of games stemmed from the need for “publicity for a small city.” At any rate, this was an apt metaphor for this church.

[27]. One difference is that the “crown of life” in 2:10 was future reward, while here it is present status. In other words, the metaphor looked at the race as ready to be run in 2:10, but as already won in 3:11. Yet at the same time they could still be disqualified by the judge for failure to maintain their relationship with Christ.

[28]. There are three grammatical forms for the “overcomer” sayings in the seven letters. The one in 3:12 resembles 2:26 and 3:21, utilizing a pendent or absolute nominative (see Zerwick 1963: §§25–26, who calls it a Semitic construction) repeated in the sentence by means of a pleonastic pronoun (“As for the one who conquers, I will make him”). There is also a dative form of the same construction (“to the one who conquers”) followed by δώσω (dōsō) and a pleonastic pronoun (“to the conqueror, I will give to him”), as in 2:7, 17; and a subject followed by a verb, as in 2:11; 3:5 (“The conqueror will . . .”). All three forms have very much the same force, with “the conqueror” the recipient of the divine gifts.

[29]. Johnson (1981: 455) brings out an interesting point. After some of the severe earthquakes in Philadelphia, virtually the only structures left intact were the “huge stone temple columns.”

[30]. Although Wilkinson (1988: 499) sees a connection between the king’s pillar and Eliakim, that is somewhat speculative.

[31]. Interestingly, the other term for “temple,” ἱερόν (hieron), referring to the whole complex of buildings that comprised the temple, is never used in the book. Ναός (naos), referring to the sanctuary proper, is always used.

[32]. For οὐ μὴ ἔτι as “never again,” see BAGD 315, which notes Heb. 8:12; 10:17; and Rev. 18:21, 22, 23 as parallels.

[33]. ὄνομα is used nine times in the letters to the seven churches. See 3:5 for a discussion of this term.

7. Letter to Laodicea (3:14–22)

[1]. This identification between the canonical letter Ephesians and the epistle to Laodicea is strongly disputed in an excellent discussion by O’Brien (1982: 257–58), who believes that the Laodicean letter mentioned by Paul is not extant. We must conclude

that the Lord did not intend it to be preserved in the canon. The claim that canonical Ephesians was a circular letter is based in part on the fact that “in Ephesus” (Eph. 1:1) is missing from several early manuscripts (□⁴⁶ B), and most surmise it was added on the basis of the importance of Ephesus as the central church in the region.

[2]. On Laodicea see Bruce, *ABD* 4:229–31; Borchert, *ISBE* 3:72–74; as well as Ramsay, Hemer, Mounce, Johnson, Thomas, Aune.

[3]. This is the one list of characteristics with no allusion back to the inaugural vision of 1:12–20. The titles seem to have been chosen entirely to challenge the Laodiceans.

[4]. Most likely the LXX read the pointing of the Hebrew as 𐤓𐤌𐤍 (*ōmen*) rather than 𐤓𐤌𐤍 (*āmēn*).

[5]. For an excellent discussion on the OT background behind the titles of Christ in this verse, see Beale 1996: 133–52, summarized in Beale 1999: 297–301.

[6]. The use of ἀληθινός from the LXX of Isa. 65:16 may well be deliberate to link the two titles.

[7]. As in 3:1 (see discussion there) the ὅτι introduces a dependent clause giving the contents of the “works.”

[8]. The two articles that turned the situation around were Rudwick and Green (1957–58) and Wood (1961–62).

[9]. BAGD 599 says this is probably not the first-person aorist but a participle that had become a fixed form for an unattainable wish, “would that.”

[10]. The οὕτως (*houtōs*, therefore) that begins the verse ties together the two clauses of v. 16 and provides a natural bridge from 3:15. “As a result of” being “neither cold nor hot,” they were “lukewarm” and about to suffer imminent judgment.

[11]. Several (Swete, Beckwith, Thomas) have noted the rhetorical device of *hysteron-proteron* in “I am rich and have wealth.” This means a reversal of the natural order to make a point. In reality, they could only say “I am rich” on the basis of “having wealth.” The emphasis is on “I have gotten rich on my own.” This makes the conclusion obvious—“I need nothing.”

[12]. Hemer (1986: 192–95) notes the debate as to whether they were refused aid because of bad relations with Rome or (as perhaps is more likely) refused aid because they did not need any help.

[13]. As Johnson (1981: 458) says, “The Laodiceans may have interpreted their material wealth as a blessing from God and thus have been self-deceived as to their true spiritual state.” The parallel with the church today is obvious.

[14]. Again, the second singular is used for rhetorical effect. It is the angel that is addressed on behalf of the church. Their sin is in essence bringing disgrace on their guardian angel. Many have called the article that follows “generic” and linked it to a collective use of οὗ for the whole church. However, the second singular is used throughout the letters to address the angel on behalf of the church.

[15]. On the basis of Sharp’s rule, the article draws the five characteristics into a single whole, with each one building on the other to describe the actual spiritual situation at Laodicea.

[16]. Οἶδα (*oida*, I know) is more predominant in the letters (2:2, 9, 13, 17, 19; 3:1, 8, 15, 17) than γινώσκω (2:23, 24; 3:3, 9). As discussed in 2:2, whenever οἶδα is used with Christ as subject, it speaks of absolute (divine) knowledge, as in 3:15, “I know your deeds.” When people are the subject (see 2:17), it has the classical meaning of theoretical knowledge. Thus here it means they do not have the mental acumen to realize this truth.

[17]. The view of some (Krodel 1989: 144; Johnson 1981: 458) that this refers to the “cross” as the refining fire is interesting but not as likely. As Thomas (1992: 313–14) says, the “gold” pictures a “high quality faith” that withstands trials and results in good works as in Luke 12:21; 1 Tim. 6:18; James 1:9–11; 2:5; 1 Pet. 1:7.

[18]. Hemer (1986: 199–201) elaborates on the centrality of this industry for Laodicea. Ancient writers like Strabo and Vetrivius commented on the lucrative nature of this soft, raven-black wool for the city. Many types of wool or embroidered clothing were manufactured, and they were even known in the Roman Empire as “Laodicean” or “Phrygian” clothes. The three sister cities were famed for their clothing industry, Colosse for its purple wool and Hierapolis for its dyed wool, but Laodicea outdid them all.

[19]. Thomas (1992: 315) points out the use of this verb in the NT for the revelation of things (now or at the last day) hidden from humankind (1 Cor. 4:5; 2 Cor. 5:11; Eph. 5:13; 1 John 3:2). In Rev. 16:15 this will occur at the return of Christ. Here it has begun in the present.

[20]. Τῆς γυμνότητός σου (*tēs gymnotētos sou*, of your nakedness) could be a Hebraism (“shameful nakedness”), a genitive of source (“the shame brought about by your nakedness”), or an exegetical genitive (“the shame that is your nakedness”). In light of the connotation of judgment that is inherent in both, “shameful nakedness” is more likely. The two combine for a single idea, disgrace and judgment.

[21]. For a history of ancient ophthalmology and its relationship to Laodicea, see Hemer 1986: 196–99. He points out that the evidence for this is more scanty than for the gold or the black wool, but it is nevertheless sufficient. Apparently, the medical school at the temple of Men Karou followed Herophilus of Chalcedon, a famous physician of the third century B.C. who emphasized compound drugs for medication. The eye salve of this school probably comprised copper, zinc, alum, and several herbs.

[22]. The use of ἠλέω here rather than ἀγαπῶ (*agapō*, I love), especially since the LXX of Prov. 3:12 (probably behind this) has the latter, is debated. Some (Trench, Barclay, Mounce, Thomas) believe this is a warm personal affection rather than a deep love, possibly to distinguish them from the Philadelphians (for whom ἀγαπάω was used in 3:9). That is unlikely, however, for the two verbs are used synonymously in John (see Carson 1991: 676–77) and Revelation. Neither verb is frequent in Revelation, with ἀγαπάω found in 1:5; 3:9; 12:11; and 20:9, and ἠλέω in 3:19 and 22:15. Yet as in John, both terms are used for divine love (1:5; 3:9, 19; 20:9) and for human love (12:11 with 22:15).

[23]. Ramsay (1904: 431–33) called 3:19–22 an epilogue to the letter rather than part of the letter itself. However, few have followed him on this. The presence of three characteristics of the letters—the call to repentance (3:19–20), the promise to the overcomers (3:21), and the call to listen (3:22)—make this supposition impossible to sustain. Also, see Hemer (1986: 201–2) for a

detailed response to Ramsay's specific reasons.

[24]. The best argument I have seen for this is from Johnson (1981: 459), who says these are weak professing Christians rather than true believers. However, that is unlikely. They are addressed as a valid church, have a guardian angel, and are the focus of divine love and discipline. There is no hint at all that they are not Christians.

[25]. The aorist subjunctive verbs here have a future thrust. Christ is presently seeking admittance, but his dining with them depends on their future response.

[26]. Some (Rudwick and Green 1957: 178–79; Hemer 1986: 204) have posited a local setting for the picture of the “door.” It could well refer to the four city gates of Laodicea that opened on the busy trade routes. Jesus then is the traveler seeking admittance through the gates. Will he be given hospitality or denied entrance (one of the purposes of the city gates)? This is certainly possible, but the “door” to the home where a meal will be shared fits the imagery better.

[27]. The future tenses of the verbs build on the implicit future thrust of the ἐάν clause above. While this could be taken as evidence for the eschatological view, it does not necessitate such a view. Future tenses are used throughout the NT in order to challenge the reader to make a decision.

[28]. Some (Caird, Prigent, Roloff, Harrington) see in the Luke 22:29–30 parallel a eucharistic thrust, in which “week by week, past and future met in the sacramental Now” (Caird 1966: 58). While it is possible that this pictures the Eucharist as a foretaste of the final messianic celebration, the language of v. 20 more closely fits table fellowship than a more narrow eucharistic background.

[29]. Hemer (1986: 202–6) posits local background for this imagery as well. In the history of Laodicea, a period of great tension with Rome lasted from 85 B.C. to the end of that century. Because they capitulated to Mithridates, the Romans exacted a terrible tribute and several years of crippling taxation upon them. In addition, the people had to billet and pay for the Roman soldiers and bureaucrats sent to them; as capital of the district, the burden especially fell on Laodicea. Some of Laodicea's self-sufficient independence probably stemmed from this bad experience. The Romans often would take over a household and force the residents to billet them. The contrast with Jesus “standing at the door and knocking” is striking. “His coming is not a threat, but a precious promise for the individual who will invite him, and the δέϊνον of which he speaks is not extorted with insult, but ‘the symbol of an enduring friendship’ (Rudwick and Green, p. 178n.)” (Hemer 1986: 204).

[30]. As in 2:5, the infinitive following δώσω means to “grant” someone the privilege of sharing in something.

[31]. These two aorists are also global, summing up Jesus' “victory” (the same verb as “the one who overcomes”) and exaltation.

[32]. In the NT generally and in 3:21, there is a distinction between the Father's throne and Jesus' throne, and this is continued in 5:1; 6:16; 7:10. But in 7:17 the Lamb is at “the center of the throne,” and in 22:1, 3 it is “the throne of God and of the Lamb.” In eternity the one God will have one throne.

A. God's Sovereignty in Judgment (4:1–11:19)

[1]. Hopkins (1965: 43–45) says these chapters do not deal with Rome but with the triumph of Christianity over Judaism. He sees this especially in the Jewish nature of chap. 4 and the way the three woes of chaps. 9 and 11 typify the Jewish War of A.D. 66–70. So chaps. 4–11 are a historical recital of God's judgment on Israel as a prelude to the apocalyptic vision of chaps. 12–20. This is difficult to uphold, however, in light of the broader nature of these chapters. More likely, Jew and Gentile are combined into the inclusive “nations” of the book.

a. God on His Throne (4:1–11)

[1]. Contra Rowland (1979: 139), who says there is nothing specifically Christian in chap. 4, and it is incidental to the themes and purposes of the book.

[2]. Aune (1997: 280–82) asserts that the idea of a “door to heaven” was even more prominent in the Greco-Roman world and especially in Asia Minor, for instance in the temple to Artemis in Ephesus, with a door that symbolized “a ritual epiphany of the goddess.”

[3]. The language by which the “voice” gives the message is strange indeed. First, the feminine participle λαλούσης is used, and then the masculine λέγων. The repetition in itself is somewhat clumsy, but the change of gender is more difficult still. The first probably refers to the “voice” and the second to Christ himself. Also, the genitive case of the first is due to attraction to the genitive σάλπγγος and the nominative case of the second is one of the “solecisms” (seemingly indeclinable uses of participles) in Revelation described by Turner (see N. Turner 1963: 314–15; Thomas 1992: 336 nn. 19–20).

[4]. It does not matter whether we say John continued in his ecstatic state from the first vision (Beckwith, Mounce) or returned to a normal state and then experienced a further vision (Morris, Thomas). The latter may be slightly more likely, but the text is not clear.

[5]. As several point out (Swete, BAGD 426, Thomas), this form is equivalent to ἐτέθη (*etethē*, stood). It could mean that the throne was placed in heaven at that point but more likely means it was found there.

[6]. The use of the accusative case after ἐπί has been variously explained, and it is unlikely that it has any particular significance. According to Thomas (1992: 340 n. 34) the accusative with ἐπί occurs in 4:2, 4; 6:2, 4, 5; 14:14; 17:3; 19:11; 20:4, 11; the genitive in 4:10; 5:1, 7; 6:16; 14:15; 17:1; 19:18, 19, 21; and the dative in 4:9; 5:13; 7:10; 19:4; 21:5. R. Charles (1920: 1.113) suggests that the case generally follows the case of the participle. While this is not always true (exceptions may be found in 6:4; 7:15; 14:15, 16; 21:5), it is the case nineteen of the twenty-four times.

[7]. Rowland (1982: 59–60) sees the Ezekiel allusion as primary and states that John is following the impression made on Ezekiel “by the colour of the light of God's glory.”

[8]. Caird (1966: 63) takes it in the opposite sense, as a guarantee of his great mercy: “It tells us that there is to be no triumph for

God’s sovereignty at the expense of his mercy, and it warns us not to interpret the visions of disaster that follow as though God had forgotten his promise to Noah.” This is certainly the majority opinion (Swete, Morris, Harrington, Sweet, Giesen, Beale). However, God does destroy the earth in fire (2 Pet. 3:10), and this could just as well prepare for the judgment theme in the rest of the book.

- [9]. ΣΤΕΙΛΑΝΟΥΣ ΧΡΥΣΟΥΣ (*stephanous chrysous*, crowns of gold) is a descriptive genitive, “golden crowns.”
- [10]. Feuillet (1964: 194–200) posits that the elders are glorified men best seen as the great heroes of the OT. They are separate from the NT saints of 5:9–17; 15:2–4; and 19:5–9, and their white robes allude to the priesthood, with their number (24) alluding to the Levitical orders. Their eschatological lordship fits the great men of the OT, for the heroes had a special part in the future kingdom, just like the elders here.
- [11]. Baumgarten (1976: 66–70) combines the first and fifth views, calling this a “duodecimal court” and utilizing imagery from the OT, Qumran, and the Sanhedrin.
- [12]. The present tense (a deliberate change from the aorist ἔγενόμην, *egenomēn*, was, in 4:2 that dominates 4:2–4) is dramatic, emphasizing an ongoing theophanic storm signifying the awesome presence of God. This effect is heightened by the plural “lightnings and rumblings and thunders.”
- [13]. ΦΩΑΪ in one sense is similar to the “thunders” that follow but could well sum up the whole effect of the storm (so BAGD 870).
- [14]. As Schneider (*EDNT* 2:338) points out, these were originally torches made of resinous pine or dry twigs covered with pitch that were used for nighttime activities.
- [15]. Contra Giblin (1998: 507), who sees them as seven celestial agents of the Lamb who become the seven angels with trumpets in 8:2.
- [16]. Aune (1998a: 870) points out that this comparative particle is typical in apocalyptic “to emphasize the mysterious and enigmatic character of what is seen (Dan. 7:4, 7, 13; 4 Ezra 11:37; 14:39).” In Revelation it is seen in 4:6; 5:6; 6:6; 8:8; 9:7; 13:2; 14:2; 15:2; 19:6.
- [17]. Mounce (1998: 122) points out that ancient glass was semi-opaque, while this is “crystal clear.”
- [18]. Caird (1966: 65) believes that here in 4:6 as well the “sea” refers to “the reservoir of evil out of which arises the monster (xiii. 1).” Beale (1999: 327) states that it typifies the Red Sea, which is sometimes seen as the home of the sea monster (Ps. 74:12–15; Isa. 51:9–11). As such it would mean that “the chaotic powers of the sea are calmed by divine sovereignty” (328). Elsewhere Beale (1983: 187–88; see also Giblin 1998: 507) adds 2 Esdr. (4 Ezra) 13 as a parallel. There the chaotic waters of the “sea” (= evil) are calmed by the Lamb, who has “slain the dragon in the sea, bringing about cosmic peace” (cf. 5:6–7). While interesting, these suggestions are unlikely in this context, for there is no hint here of conflict with the powers of evil. In fact, this is the direct opposite of that image, depicting divine goodness and majesty.
- [19]. The term for these creatures, ζῷα (*zōa*, living beings) can refer to an “animal” or “beast” (as in KJV), but this does not fit in the context of chap. 4. It is a celestial “being” of some sort.
- [20]. It is also possible to take ἐν μέσῳ as a Hebraism meaning “between” the throne and the sea (so Sweet; BAGD 507), but the parallel with 5:6 makes that less likely. It is also possible (with Brewer 1952) to see this as an image drawn from the theater of Ephesus, with its semicircular row of seats near the stage for dignitaries. However, this would place the throne beneath rather than above the angelic spectators, and the Ezekiel imagery is paramount, so this is unlikely. Hall (1990: 610–13) sees a parallel with the ark in Exod. 25:17–22 and 37:6–9 and believes this means the living creatures are “within the space of” the throne as components of it (perhaps engraved on it).
- [21]. It is unnecessary to surmise that they are in rapid movement (from Ezek. 1:12–13) around the throne (like Thomas 1992: 355, following Swete and Beckwith). There is no indication of that here.
- [22]. The participle functions here as virtually an adjective, “full of,” rather than having verbal force, “filled with.” The emphasis is on the current state rather than the ongoing process.
- [23]. This chart illustrates the diversity of opinion about the identifications (building on Thomas 1992: 355):

	Irenaeus	Victorinus	Augustine	Athanasius	Modern
Lion	John	Mark	Matthew	Luke	Matthew (royalty)
Ox	Luke	Luke	Luke	Mark	Mark (servanthood)
Man	Matthew	Matthew	Mark	Matthew	Luke (humanity)
Eagle	Mark	John	John	John	John (deity)

- [24]. In Babylonian temples Ezekiel would have seen the frequent use of winged creatures resembling oxes and lions, or with eagle’s heads and human bodies.
- [25]. A version of this is seen in Caird (1966: 65–68), who links this scene with the Babylonian creation myth in which light (Marduk) triumphs over darkness (Tiamat) and establishes order. However, the parallels are even less obvious in this theory.
- [26]. As several have noted (Beckwith, R. Charles, Alford, Thomas), there are also key differences between the figures of Isaiah/Ezekiel and the beings in Revelation. Each being in Ezekiel has four faces, while in Revelation each one has one of the faces. Also, the face is emphasized in each being in Ezekiel but mentioned only with “the face of a man” in Revelation. In Ezekiel they are associated with wheels and bear the divine throne, while in Revelation they surround the throne as sentinels. The eyes are part of the rim of the wheels in Ezek. 1:18, while in Rev. 4:8 the beings themselves have “eyes all around.” In short, John has adapted the

cherubim and seraphim for his own purposes.

[27]. A common grammatical anomaly occurs twice in 4:7, 8, with the masculine ἔχων (*echōn*, having) modifying the neuter ζῶον (*zōon*, being) in v. 7 and ἓν (*hen*, one) in v. 8. This often occurs when the neuter represents a living being.

[28]. Thomas (1992: 357) may be correct when he says the places they are distinguished from angels (5:8, 11; 7:11) may be due to “their exalted state among their fellow angels.”

[29]. The genitive for time “during” which something occurs is quite common; see BDF §186.2.

[30]. It is too speculative to state that the threefold repetition points to the Trinity. That would be especially unlikely in Isaiah, for it is primarily an NT emphasis. Yet even in this respect, there is little trinitarian theology in the book (the best example would be 1:4b–5), and none in this context. The “sevenfold Spirit” in 4:5 and the Lion, Root of David, and Lamb of 5:5–6 in one sense point to the Trinity but do not constitute a trinitarian emphasis.

[31]. In every instance of the complete title in Revelation, κύριος (*kyrios*, Lord) is anarthrous while the other two titles are articular. This serves to draw attention to his lordship over creation.

[32]. The use of the future tense δώσουσιν (*dōsousin*, will give) rather than an aorist subjunctive with ὅταν is quite common in Koine Greek due to the close connection between the two (see BDF §363).

[33]. As some point out (Roloff, Krodel, Aune), vv. 9–11 are drawn from the “court ceremonial” language of Rome and focus on God as the only great king.

[34]. Note that “unceasing” does not mean continuous praise but rather refers to repeated acts of worship as in 5:9–10, 14; 11:16–17; 19:4. The living beings and elders engage in “unceasing” worship in the same way that Paul prayed “without ceasing” (Rom. 1:9–10; Col. 1:9; 2 Thess. 1:11), i.e., whenever he had an opportunity.

[35]. It is common (see R. Charles, Lohse, Roloff, Aune) to consider this a four-line hymn. Lohmeyer (1926: 47) and the NIV break up the last line and have a five-line hymn. It is likely that the four-line hymn is correct, for it provides better balance to the lines.

[36]. Some (O’Rourke 1968: 404; Roloff 1993: 72) argue that this goes beyond emperor worship and stems from early Christian liturgy, perhaps from the invitation to worship recorded in 1 Clem. 38.4, “Let us give thanks to the Lord,” with the response, “It is honorable and appropriate that we give you honor.” While “worthiness” is not directly stated in the OT, there are sufficient parallels to make this possible.

[37]. L. Thompson (1990: 104–9) describes the development of the imperial cult from the deification of Julius Caesar and Augustus to Trajan, who follows Domitian and deifies even his own relatives. He denies that Domitian ever assumed the title “our Lord and our God” because there are no examples of the title on coins or in inscriptions. Aune (1997: 311–12) counters that the writings of Dio Cassius and Dio Chrysostom sufficiently demonstrate that the title was used of Domitian.

[38]. λαβεῖν (*labein*, to receive) is often used in the NT in a theologically significant sense of a passive reception of something. It is normally used of God’s people who “receive” (= “are given”) gifts from God, but in a worship setting like this one it can refer to God’s “reception” of praise from his people. The aorist infinitive is the normal tense and should not be given too much weight here. There is no particular punctiliar sense here.

[39]. The use of the article before each member may be anaphoric (“the same glory and honor” ascribed in 4:9 [where they are anarthrous]—but the third member is different than in 4:9, so this may not fit) or may be used to concretize the nouns (“the glory, honor, and power” that are his due). The latter is slightly more likely due to the addition of a different member of the triad.

[40]. Some (e.g., Beasley-Murray 1978: 119) believe that this should be translated “for the sake of your will” and interpreted to mean that God created this world not for humanity but for himself. While this is possible, it is more likely that it means “because of your will” and teaches that God was the “cause” of creation, the basis for all that exists.

b. Christ the Lamb, Worthy to Open the Seals (5:1–14)

[1]. Some (e.g., Beckwith 1919: 504; Moffatt 1983: 382) see God holding the book “in” his right hand, because of both the sliding together of the two prepositions in the Koine period and the difficulty of picturing a large scroll balanced in an open hand (see 20:1 on the chain “in” the hand of the angel). God is waiting for one to take the book from him, however, and the open hand fits the context better.

[2]. Some have argued that this is a codex or book rather than a scroll. Codices developed at the end of the first century and became popular in the second century. While a codex is possible, the way the seals are opened in chap. 6 makes it more likely that this is a scroll.

[3]. The order is that of the Greek text (as also in 5:5), which many (Beckwith, R. Charles, Mounce, Thomas) call an example of *hysteron-proteron* (last-first). The opening of the scroll is of first priority, and the breaking of the seals the means by which that is to be accomplished. Moreover, there is probably also an exegetical καί, “the opening of the scroll, *even* the breaking of the seals,” meaning the two are part of the same act.

[4]. The imperfect tense refers to an ongoing situation. At no time do created beings have the power to perform the divine action. As Aune (1997: 330) says, there are few imperfects in the book, and when they occur they stress continual action in the past.

[5]. There is an interesting interplay between the aorist ἀνοίξαι (*anoixai*, to open) and the present βλέπειν (*blepein*, to see). It is likely that the reader is to picture a single act of opening the scroll followed by an ongoing perusal of its contents.

[6]. This is the second imperfect verb, with ἐδύνατο in 5:3. Some have argued for an inceptive or inchoative imperfect describing action ready to begin but not actually done. This is unlikely because John is described as weeping “loudly,” and that type of detail would not fit incomplete action. Moreover, the angel tells him in 5:5 to “stop weeping,” which would imply that he was doing just that. Rather, the verb is a dramatic imperfect that adds force to the deep expression of grief felt by John.

[7]. Ford (1975b: 85) points out that in the NT this verb always depicts the unrestrained weeping of grief, often by professional

mourners.

[8]. The use of ἑκ (*ek*, of) in place of the normal genitive is a Hebraism common to John, occurring twelve times in his Gospel and eight times in Revelation while only ten times in the rest of the NT. As Thomas (1992: 386 n. 42) says, this is a strong pointer to the apostolic authorship of the Apocalypse.

[9]. As Bauckham 1993b: 214 points out, these two texts are combined in 4QPBless; 1QSb 5.20–29; 2 Esdr. (4 Ezra) 12:31–32, with strong militaristic overtones of Yahweh’s defeat of the enemies of Israel.

[10]. Geyser (1982: 388–99) takes this as depicting not only the victory of Christ but his reinstatement of the twelve-tribe kingdom, a promise he sees given to the Palestinian church of John’s day. While this is interesting, it depends too heavily on a literal interpretation of imagery like the 144,000 in 7:1–8. Such an emphasis is unlikely for Revelation.

[11]. The infinitive ἀνοῖξαι (*anoixai*, to open) carries its basic purposive force. The lion has conquered “so that” he can “open the scroll and its seven seals” (for the reversal of the order of the scroll, see 5:2 and n. 3 above).

[12]. Hengel (1996: 159–75) shows how the throne imagery fits a high Christology in the Apocalypse and parallels the Gospel of John in attributing divine status to the Lamb as not only slain but one with God.

[13]. The only two other places that ἀποστέλλω occurs in the Apocalypse are 1:1 and 22:6, where God “sends” his angel to reveal the visions to John and the church. Yet this parallels the use here, for in this context the sevenfold Spirit is “sent” to reveal God to the nations.

[14]. There is an interesting grammatical anomaly, as αἱ εἰς (*hai eisin*, which are) modifies “bowls” rather than “incense,” which is the likely antecedent. Most explain this as inverse relative attraction to “prayers” in its own clause (e.g., Thomas 1992: 397, following Swete, R. Charles).

[15]. As Mounce (1998: 135) points out, the picture here of angels presenting prayers to God was common in Jewish thought. In Tob. 12:15 Raphael presents prayers to God, and in 3 Bar. 11 Michael receives the prayers of the saints.

[16]. In another work (1974: 231), she takes this in sociopolitical terms as “purchasing” people from the powers of the Roman Empire. She believes John has here transformed the baptismal imagery of 1:5–6 (“freed us from our sins by his blood”) in a liberation-theological direction.

[17]. Beale (1999: 361) believes Dan. 7:22b and 7:27a LXX have a strong influence on this passage and finds four parallels: (1) the kingdom is given to the saints in the end time; (2) the saints reign, with (3) a three- to fourfold formula denoting universality; and (4) sovereign authority is given to a divine (messianic) figure.

[18]. I disagree with Aune, however, when he says that this does not constitute the ascription of deity to the Lamb but rather royalty. This is part of a larger theme throughout the book in which the Lamb shares all the attributes of deity (e.g., the title “Alpha and Omega”) and indeed sits on the throne with God (5:6; 22:1). Only the Gospel of John contains as much emphasis on the deity of Christ.

[19]. There is some debate as to whether “glory and honor” should be linked with the first four as attributes of Christ (so Johnson 1981: 470) or with the seventh as worship (so Krodel 1989: 168; Morris 1987: 99). The key is whether we see them as substantives describing the Lord or as verbal nouns describing the response of the angels to the Lord. I believe the latter is better, for it fits the sense of worship that pervades the scene.

[20]. Some (Alford, Ladd, Thomas) argue against the inclusion of the animal world on the grounds that nonintelligent beings can hardly sing praises. However, this is to ignore the apocalyptic symbolism of the book. Throughout, animate and inanimate creation fights on the side of God against Satan (e.g., 12:14, 16). Another issue is whether this means forced homage on the part of the demons and earth-dwellers. That is perhaps to be inferred but is not the emphasis here.

2. Opening the Seals (6:1–8:1)

[1]. Beagley (1987: 38–44) argues from the seals that these judgments are poured out primarily on the Jewish people for their persecution of the church. He believes that the OT background of judgment against Israel supports such an interpretation. It is more likely, however, that John, as elsewhere in Revelation, transforms these judgments and universalizes them to the whole world, as seen in the centrality of “nations” and “earth-dwellers” in the book. These terms cannot be restricted to Israel.

[2]. This is challenged strongly by Aune (1998a: 95–96), who believes that there is no interest in repentance. Rather, John follows the exodus pattern, in which each plague was followed by God hardening Pharaoh’s heart (Exod. 7:3–4a; 10:1) or by Pharaoh hardening his own heart. Moreover, Jewish apocalypses never seek repentance, and it is unlikely here. However, there is indeed an emphasis on repentance in chaps. 6–16 (see passages above), and John has transformed the exodus imagery in light of his emphasis on the mission motif in the book.

a. First Six Seals (6:1–17)

[1]. Beale (1999: 370–71) argues that the four disasters are simultaneous rather than sequential, since the fourth seal sums up the first three (see on 6:8) and the models for these—Ezek. 14:12–21; Zech. 6:5–8; and the Synoptic eschatological discourse—portray a single event. However, he also recognizes the pattern noted above (conquest to civil unrest, famine, and death), and it is likely that this pattern predominates.

[2]. Lambrecht (1998: 204–9) notes the thesis of Biguzzi that they do not deal with the action of punishment but with the revelation of God’s intentions carried out in the trumpets and bowls. He alters this by arguing that they are more than announcement; they are prophetic preparation for the future punishment and so are an action in and of themselves. However, the movement from war to famine to death has too much an atmosphere of judgment to be taken this way.

[3]. The cardinal number μίαν (*mian*, one) is used in place of the ordinal “first,” a common Hebraism in the NT; cf. BDF §247.1.

[4]. The genitive here is probably descriptive, “voice like thunder.”

[5]. In an interesting twist on this, Feuillet (1966: 231–38) believes this is neither Christ nor an evil spirit but an avenging angel sent out to bring judgment on the world, building on the OT image of arrows as divine judgments (Deut. 32:23–24; Lam. 3:12–13; Ezek. 5:16–17). The other three seals are then the actual “arrows of judgment” he sends. This avoids some of the weaknesses of the first two and is a real possibility. The only difficulty is seeing these as heavenly agents.

[6]. Kerkeslager (1993) builds on Vos’s (1965: 186–91) linking of the seals with the order of Mark 13 and believes that the first horseman = false messiahs and false prophecy. Thus the crown is a false crown, the bow is Apollo’s as a caricature of the Word of God (= the sword). The problem is that this does not fit the actual order and depiction of the four horsemen and is too allegorical (see also n. 9 below).

[7]. Michaels (1997: 101) follows Kerkeslager (1993: 116–21) and sees this as a metaphor pointing to the “war” between the false prophets and the church. Thus the rider symbolizes the false prophets who are “conquering” churches like Pergamum and Thyatira, and could point to traditions from Mark 13 and 2 Thess. 2 regarding the “great apostasy” caused by these false messiahs. However, the military imagery and the progression between the first four seals makes this less likely. They all picture the effects of war, and a more literal understanding of the symbolism makes better sense.

[8]. Poirier (1999) sees this differently, taking the four horsemen as “heaven-sent” and the first as God’s avenger on his enemies.

[9]. For an excellent history of Rome’s relations with the Parthians, see Aune 1998a: 891–94.

[10]. Beale (1999: 379) interprets this not as civil war but as the persecution of Christians on the basis of the parallel with Matt. 10:34, “Do not think I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace but a sword.” However, while the language is similar (peace, earth, sword), the context is not. It is much more likely that the sequence in Rev. 6:1–8 is war, civil war, famine, and death. There is no evidence in the context that Christians are in view in this section. The best argument for this view would be the fifth seal (the martyrs), with the first four describing the cause (persecution) and the fifth the result. But there is no hint in 6:1–8 that this is the case.

[11]. The use of the future tense rather than the subjunctive in a ἵνα (*hina*, that) clause is normal in the Book of Revelation. Moreover, the ἵνα clause is virtually equivalent to an infinitive and so is parallel to the infinitive “to take” in the previous clause.

[12]. Those who argue that the living creatures here sum up nature are drawing too much from 4:7. Throughout the book they are celestial, not natural, beings.

[13]. Peachey (1999: 215–16) points out the errors in translations of seeking technical colors for the horses in Zech. 1 (like “sorrel” or “dappled gray”). Instead, the colors are symbolic and should be translated normally. Therefore, the color here is “green,” for that is the meaning of the term and that is what a corpse looks like.

[14]. The first three seals (6:2, 4, 5) have the rider ἐπ’ (*ep’*, on), while this seal has the rider ἐπάνω (*epanō*, above) the horse. It is difficult to explain the change, and some have suggested this rider is above rather than upon the horse. As BAGD 283 points out, however, this is normally an adverb, and when used as a preposition it can easily mean “on” in terms of “on top of.” Therefore, the translation “atop” is appropriate.

[15]. BAGD 508 shows that with verbs of “following” μετὰ means “to follow after.”

[16]. The use of ῥομφαία (*romphaia*, sword) rather than μάχαιρα (6:4) is probably due to the presence of that word in the LXX of Ezek. 14:21 and not to any difference of meaning. At times in the ancient world, the two terms could be synonymous.

[17]. As stated above, θάνατος here does not mean “death” but “pestilence” or “plague.” As the third in the list, it alone would not refer to death, since the devastation of one-fourth of humanity is the result of all four of the judgments listed here.

[18]. Most likely, the saints will be spared this judgment (3:10; 7:3; 8:13; 9:4); as in the trumpets (9:18), the saints are not part of the imagery here. On the basis of the Ezek. 14 parallel, however, Beale (1999: 372–73) believes that the saints will be part of this judgment. In this sense the faithful will be purified, and those engaging in idolatry “will be judged by the same tribulations” in Rev. 6:1–8. This is possible but depends too much on reading Ezekiel’s imagery into the text here. The larger context (3:10; 7:3) of 6:1–8 would favor the sparing of the saints.

[19]. Each of the first four seals begins with ἤκουσα (*ēkousa*, I heard) leading into John “hearing” the commands by the living creatures. Καί εἶδον (*kai eidon*, and I saw) is used twice (6:2, 8) to distinguish the vision that followed the command. Here εἶδον is used in the same way, to highlight the vision that followed Christ’s opening of the fifth seal.

[20]. An entirely different interpretation is given by Michaels (1997: 105–6), who believes this is neither a heavenly scene nor temple imagery, but the scene of those martyred on earth, and the “altar” is the prayers of the saints that ascend as sacrifices to God. Thus the emphasis is not on their deaths so much as on their prayers. This is an interesting and plausible thesis. However, due to the heavy emphasis on martyrology throughout the book (see the excellent study of martyrdom by Stewart 1990), and the use of the “altar” as a heavenly altar elsewhere in the book, I do not believe it is the most likely thesis.

[21]. This parallels the Lamb that was “slaughtered” in 5:6. Heil (1993: 222–23) believes this took place during the “slaughter” of the second seal (6:4, “cause people to slaughter one another”). This is possible if the civil war of the second seal is expanded to include the killing of the saints. There is little evidence to restrict 6:4 to persecution.

[22]. As stated in BAGD 238, ἐκ normally states the person on whom vengeance is taken.

[23]. The stress on the individual occurs seven times (2:23; 5:8; 6:11; 20:13; 21:21; 22:2, 12) and is an important feature. God does not vindicate just the church but every believer within it.

[24]. The impersonal passive ἐρρέθη αὐτοῖς (*errethē autois*, it was told to them) followed by the content of the message in a ἵνα clause may well be used to avoid saying the name of God (due to Jewish piety) and should be translated, “God told them that. . .”

[25]. This is an adverbial accusative of time, “for a little longer.”

[26]. Interestingly, χρόνος is used in 10:6 (12:12 uses καιρός) as well as in 20:3, where Satan after the millennium is “set free for a

short time.” In God’s sovereign will, evil is allowed its day, but it is a brief period and then judgment will fall.

[27]. Swete (1911: 92) says the first group represents all the saints, and the second are the martyrs. However, the *καὶ . . . καὶ* construction indicates they should be taken together.

[28]. The traditional debate as to whether this should be interpreted literally or symbolically is part of that larger debate on the whole as discussed in the introduction to this work. As stated there, I do not believe that God is telling us which elements of this book will actually occur and which are symbolic. We are to take this as a whole picture, at one and the same time literal and symbolic, and leave the question “what exactly will happen” up to God. We will find out when it happens.

[29]. The attempt of Thomas (1992: 453–54) to say these are not actual “stars” but meteors because stars are still around at the time of the fourth trumpet depends on taking the seals, trumpets, and bowls as a successive sequence. For those who take a cyclical view, this is not necessary. The falling of the stars at the trumpets and bowls is closely connected to the sixth seal.

[30]. The term for “late figs” is *ὀλύνθους* (*olynthous*), which refers to spring figs that develop under the leaves and are easily blown off by any strong gust of wind (see Swete 1911: 93).

[31]. Others (Swete 1911: 93; Mounce 1998: 151) see a slightly different picture, with the heaven/scroll splitting apart in the middle (the verb also means to “separate” or “split”) and “rolling back” in two parts to the sides. Either picture is possible.

[32]. Thomas (1992: 454–55) points out correctly the error of those (like R. Charles 1920: 1.181; Beckwith 1919: 529) who take this figuratively of unsettling the established international powers. This hardly fits the imagery of the shaking of the heavens in this section. However, Thomas goes on to say that this is not as intense as 16:20, asserting that only some will be “removed” because there must be mountains remaining to fall upon the earth-dwellers in 6:16. Thus the complete removal does not occur until 16:20. Such anomalies as 6:14, 16 are common in this book, however, and with the cyclical organization of the book 6:14 and 16:20 most likely parallel one another.

[33]. The use of aorist imperatives in “fall . . . and hide” looks at the action as a whole (see Wallace 1996: 485–86). This is the normal tense used in such situations. It is a plea for the rocks to cover them.

i. Sealing the Saints (7:1–8)

[1]. The perfect participle *ἐστῶτας* is present in force and parallels the thrust of *κρατοῦντας*. The latter is a very strong verb and means to forcefully “hold back, restrain,” or “prevent” an action.

[2]. Attempts to identify him with Christ, the Holy Spirit, Michael, or Gabriel are fruitless. If an angel in this book is not named (the vast majority of the instances), then no specific identification is possible.

[3]. Paul follows this idea in Rom. 4:11 when he calls Abraham’s circumcision “a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith when he was still uncircumcised.”

[4]. This aorist subjunctive of prohibition could be ingressive (“do not begin to harm,” so Thomas 1992: 470) but is more likely global, “at no time harm” the vegetation until the appointed time. The emphasis is not on starting the action but on doing the action.

[5]. C. Smith (1995: 214–15) corrects one overstatement by Bauckham, who argues this is not a Christian reinterpretation of the twelve tribes but a Jewish military list (for him the Christian interpretation comes in 7:9–14). Smith argues that the order does not truly follow any such military list and is best seen as a Christian transformation of such lists.

[6]. Some (Farrer 1964: 106–7; Winkle 1989) believe that the list is drawn from Ezek. 48:31–34 but organized on the basis of the list in Rev. 21:13. Farrer argues that the spatial list is organized in a diagonal square so that Judah (first), Asher (fourth), Issachar (ninth), and Benjamin (last) are on the four corners. Winkle believes that this reverses Ezekiel’s list (arranged by compass, N-W-S-E) in a counterclockwise direction so as to maintain the primacy of Judah. While these are certainly possible, the matriarchal order of Gen. 35 seems to provide a better parallel.

[7]. The mention in several commentaries of Irenaeus’s statement that the Antichrist would come from Dan (*Against Heresies* 5.30.2) is interesting but unlikely. There is no data that this tradition went back to the early church. More viable is the statement in T. Dan 5.2, where Dan is told: “Your prince is Satan,” part of a passage detailing the apostasy of the tribe (vv. 1–6).

ii. Great Multitude in Heaven (7:9–17)

[1]. Some believe this third scene takes place in heaven during the great tribulation (Thomas 1992: 486) or during the millennium (Krodel 1989: 184). This could be correct, but I would place it more at the great white throne of 20:12 (see my discussion of that passage). The saints who have been victorious receive their reward “according to their works” (20:12) and rejoice.

[2]. The use of the imperfect *ἐδύνάτο* with the aorist infinitive *ἀριθμῆσαι* is normal in a context where the author wishes to stress progressive force. It means “at no time could anyone count the number.”

[3]. Some (Roloff, Prigent, Harrington) see the imagery as a reference to baptism, but that is highly unlikely in this context. The idea of “garments” in the book (3:4–5, 18; 16:15 for *ἱμάτιον*; and 6:11; 7:9, 13, 14; 22:14 for *στολή*) always refers to the spiritual walk of the believer. While they are “made white in the blood of the Lamb,” that is regeneration, not baptism.

[4]. The plural participle modifying the singular *ὄχλος* is due to its nature as a collective noun embodying individuals from “every nation, tribes, peoples, and languages.”

[5]. *περιβεβλημένους* parallels *ἐστῶτες* in modifying *ὄχλος*, but it is accusative rather than nominative. However, this type of solecism is common in Revelation. As Thomas (1992: 488 n. 85, following Robertson and N. Turner) brings out, this is especially common following *εἶδον* and *ἰδού* in Revelation.

[6]. While white as the sign of victory is primary due to the context, the idea of purity or righteousness is also present due to the stress on “washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the lamb” in v. 14.

- [7]. Roloff (1993: 98) states that the acclamation here “adopts almost literally an Old Testament formula in which the worshipping community expressed its confidence that God is the only aid and Savior (Ps. 3:8; 38:22; 42:11; 43:5; Jonah 2:9).”
- [8]. As Wallace (1996: 586) points out, the pluperfect *εἰστήκεισαν* (*eistēkeisan*, had stood) is equivalent to a simple past, “stood.”
- [9]. At the end of the book, *ἀμήν* could be said to frame “Come, Lord Jesus. The grace of our Lord Jesus be with God’s people” (22:20b–21). It is more likely, however, that these are two separate items.
- [10]. The perfect tense *εἶρηκα* (*eirēka*, I have said) seems out of place here. Many (Swete 1911: 102; Beckwith 1919: 544; Aune 1998a: 472) call this an aoristic perfect similar to “came and took (*ἐλήλθεν*)” in 5:7. Thomas (1992: 494) prefers to take this as a true perfect to bring out the dramatic vividness of John’s experience. Aoristic perfects are somewhat common in this book (see also 8:5; 19:3), however, and that is more likely here.
- [11]. There is some question as to whether *κύριε* indicates status or is merely a courteous greeting similar to “sir” (as in Mary’s greeting in John 20:15). With the added *μου*, however, it is more likely a title of majesty. Also, this was a common LXX term for celestial beings (cf. Dan. 10:16–17; Zech. 1:9; 4:5).
- [12]. As Wallace (1996: 625) says, “The present participle is normally *contemporaneous* in time to the action of the main verb.” BDF §339 asserts that on occasion a present participle can have an imperfect force (as R. Charles 1920: 1.213 argues), but the context must make it clear, as in “the devil who deceived [present participle] them” in 20:10. However, that type of clear context is missing here.
- [13]. However, this does not include the series of woes or judgments poured out on the earth-dwellers by God. The believers have been “sealed” from those (7:4–8). Thus Mounce (1998: 164) is wrong to say, “It is the hour of trial that is to come upon the whole world (3:10).” That passage says explicitly, “I will . . . keep you from the hour of trial.” Chilton (1987: 219–20) interprets this in preterist fashion as the “great tribulation” that the saints in the province of Asia were enduring at that time.
- [14]. As Porter (1994: 158) says, this is an example of the instrumental use of *ἐν*.
- [15]. In Revelation this is connected closely to 22:14, the final beatitude of the book: “Blessed are those who wash their robes, that they may have the right to the tree of life.” There the emphasis is not so much on spiritual salvation through the blood of Christ but faithfulness over the temptations of life. That is certainly a further emphasis here with the context of suffering persecution in this world (6:9–11) and with the active voice “washed . . . and made them white.”
- [16]. Those who apply this to baptism (Prigent, Kroll, Sweet, Roloff) go beyond the context. This refers to the redemptive effects of Christ, not to our baptism.
- [17]. LaVerdiere (1999: 547) sees a different order: 15, 16–17b, and 17c.
- [18]. As stated at 3:12, the term for the whole complex of buildings (*ἱερόν*) is never used in Revelation, and instead the term for the inner sanctuary (*ναός*) is always utilized.
- [19]. R. Charles (1920: 1.215) goes so far as to say “in the temple” was added later because of the discrepancy with 21:22, which says there is no temple in the New Jerusalem. This, hypothesis is unnecessary, however, when one realizes that the phrase is simply idiomatic here for heavenly worship. There have been several attempts to harmonize the two. Some take this as a millennial scene with the temple on earth, others as a scene in heaven just before the final judgment. I have already argued for this as a depiction of eternity, however, and it is best to take “in the temple” as a symbol rather than a literal temple in heaven or on earth.
- [20]. On the other hand, Fekkes (1994: 170–73) makes a strong case for an MT origin of this allusion. He argues that in Isaiah this is part of a “new exodus” theme and portrays a return from captivity and restoration to Zion in such a way as to evoke images of “divine provision, protection, and guidance” (172). John has transformed these into “eschatological gifts” given to those who are now in the eternal “promised land” (172).
- [21]. *Οὐδὲ μὴ* with the aorist subjunctive is an alternative form of emphatic future negation, “the sun will never beat down.”
- [22]. For this use of *ἀνὰ μέσον*, see BDF §507; BAGD 507.
- [23]. Interestingly, in the other three occurrences of *ποιμαίνω* (12:5 and 19:15 of Christ; 2:27 of the saints), the shepherding work is radically different, “shepherding” the nations “with a rod of iron,” picturing the shepherd wielding his club against wild beasts. Here the Lamb shepherds the saints, and the other side of the shepherd’s work is stressed, leading the flock to springs of water.

c. Seventh Seal (8:1)

- [1]. Some, like Swete (1911: 106), have followed the classic distinction that sees an element of uncertainty in *ὅταν*, but with the aorist indicative (and indeed more and more frequently in Koine Greek) it is synonymous with *ὅτε* (see BDF §588.2.d).
- [2]. With a numeral, *ὥς* means “about” or “approximately.”
- [3]. Michaels (1997: 116–17) goes so far as to link vv. 2–5 with v. 1 and call all of vv. 1–5 “The Opening of the Seventh Seal” (so also Beale 1999: 445). While I disagree (I believe vv. 2–5 introduce the trumpet judgments and parallel 16:1–8, the introduction to the bowl judgments), their reasons are sound. Verses 2–5 both conclude the seal judgments and introduce the trumpet judgments.

a. Introduction to Trumpet Judgments (8:2–6)

- [1]. As noted before (3:20; 5:6; 7:1, 9), the perfect of *ἵστημι* has present force, and so connotes the idea of being continually attendant to the enthroned God.
- [2]. Some (Morris, Mounce, Thomas) also see a link with “the angels of the Presence” in Jubilees. In Jub. 2.1–2 this is one of several categories (with angels of sanctification, of the spirit of fire, of the spirit of the winds, and so on), with the first two (of Presence and of sanctification) being the greatest (2.18). Due to the connection between “the Presence” and “the throne” in Jewish thought, this is a possibility.
- [3]. Another use of *ἐδόθη* (*edothē*, was given) as a divine passive stressing God’s sovereign control (see 6:2, 4, 8, 11; 8:3).

- [4]. Aune (1998a: 497) believes the war trumpet is the primary background here. In battle, trumpets were used as signals to deploy various infantry and cavalry units. In this way, Yahweh is signaling his “troops” as to when to enter the battle.
- [5]. Caird (1966: 108) believes Jericho may have been in John’s mind, for the seven priests with ram’s horns went before the ark as they marched around Jericho (Josh. 6:4), and the seventh time around (when the walls fell) could parallel the seventh trumpet, as it led to the opening of the heavenly temple with the ark (11:19).
- [6]. Mounce (1998: 174) makes an important point: “The role of the angel does not consist in making the prayers acceptable to God. The mediatorial role of angels that is so prevalent in Jewish apocalyptic does not find a place in NT theology. At best the angel of 8:3–5 is a heavenly priest who presents the prayers . . . before God.”
- [7]. This pleonastic use of ἦλθον (“came and stood”) is common in this book (5:7; 8:3; 17:1; 21:9).
- [8]. While Mounce (1998: 174) suggests that ἐπί (epi, at) might mean he stood “over” the altar, it is more likely that he simply stood “at” it. Acts 5:23 speaks of guards “standing at the doors,” and this is a similar spatial idea.
- [9]. The cognate λίβανος occurs in Matt. 2:11 (for the “frankincense” that was one of the gifts of the Magi to the infant Jesus) and Rev. 18:13 (the “frankincense” that was one of the luxuries of “Babylon”).
- [10]. Another example of the divine passive ἐδόθη in Revelation (see n. 3 above).
- [11]. See Durham 1987: 407–8; and Averbeck, *NIDOTTE* 3:913–16.
- [12]. The use of the future indicative after ἵνα (hina, in order that) is quite common in Revelation (3:9; 6:4; 9:4, 5; 13:12; 14:13; 22:14), so it is likely that no special force is intended. In a context like this, δώσει often has a sacrificial connotation, “bring an offering” (see BDF §192.1.a).
- [13]. As in the perfect tense verbs of 5:7; 7:14; 19:3, εἰληφεν (eilēphen, took) is a historic or aoristic perfect.
- [14]. Similarly, Michaels (1997: 118) says, “The altar, traditionally the place of God’s mercy, ironically becomes here the very source of divine judgment. John’s vision thus dramatizes the Jewish view that mercy and judgment are not two contrasting sides of God’s character, but are the same thing.”
- [15]. This depends on whether 8:5 concludes the seals (thus = the last judgment) or introduces the trumpets (thus = the beginning of the trumpet judgments). I conclude that while in a sense it functions in both directions, the latter predominates.
- [16]. At the same time, the storm theophanies of 8:5 and 11:19 frame the trumpet judgments and stress the majesty of the enthroned God, “who is ready to confront an idolatrous world” (Krodel 1989: 195).
- [17]. The present participle ἔχοντες (echontes, having) pictures the angels’ constant readiness to blow the trumpets, while the aorist ἡτοίμασαν (hētoimasan, prepared) is simply part of the narrative as John describes the vision he saw.

b. First Four Trumpets (8:7–12)

- [1]. Since the angels are specifically mentioned in 8:6, the text only tells us “The first sounded his trumpet.” In the other trumpet judgments, however, we read “second angel,” etc.
- [2]. I doubt if we should see here primarily fruit trees (cf. Matt. 7:17; Jude 12) because they were so important to the Palestinian way of life (so Thomas 1995: 17; Mounce 1998: 179). This is meant in a far more general sense for all trees.
- [3]. Κατεκάη (katekaē, burned up) is repeated after each of the three groups for emphasis. Mounce (1998: 178 n. 11) says this “lends to the verse the aura of a prophetic oracle; cf. ‘for three sins . . . even for four’ of Amos 1:3, 6, 9, 11, etc.”
- [4]. Some have tried to take χόρτος χλωρός (chortos chlōros, green grass) as a reference to all vegetation apart from trees. However, χόρτος always refers to grass. BAGD 884 even points to passages where it is “wild grass in contrast to cultivated plants” (Matt. 6:30; James 1:10, 11).
- [5]. My view is that while the imagery of these judgments is symbolic, the tensive symbols were meant to function at a literal (what if?) level. So the way they should be thought about is to contemporize them, which is what I do throughout the remainder of this volume.
- [6]. The use of ὥς in this way is quite common in the book (cf. 1:10, 14; 2:18; 3:3; 4:1, 6, 7; 5:6; etc.). These are more than just similes; they awaken OT and apocalyptic images that deepen the theological understanding of the passage.
- [7]. Swete (1911: 111) notes that the Roman historian Strabo reported that in 196 B.C. a volcanic eruption in the Aegean resulted in the formation of a new island.
- [8]. It is often pointed out (e.g., Moffatt, Kiddle, Thomas) that volcanic actions in the sea have at times caused it to turn a reddish hue, for instance near Thera, an Aegean island particularly noted for its volcanoes. But all note that in this vision it is actual blood and not simply a chemical reaction. There is no ὥς here as there is earlier in this verse regarding the analogy of the mountain.
- [9]. The phrase for the sea life is rather lengthy, τῶν κτισμάτων τῶν ἐν τῇ θαλάσῃ τὰ ἔχοντα ψυχάς (tōn ktismatōn tōn en tē thalassē ta echonta psychas, of the creatures in the sea that have life). The term for “creatures” stresses creation and may be part of the creation theology of this book. The difficulty is the nominative participle τὰ ἔχοντα modifying the genitive τῶν κτισμάτων. Several (Alford, R. Charles, Beckwith, Thomas) have pointed out that this peculiarity is fairly common in the book (2:13, 20; 3:12; 9:14; 14:12) and means the second phrase is in apposition with the first phrase.
- [10]. Caird (1966: 114–15) believes this should be linked with Isa. 14:12–20 (a prophecy against the king of Babylon) and an ancient myth about a god Heyl, the morning star, who tried to ascend to the highest heaven but fell to earth. Others (R. Charles 1920: 1.234–35; Beckwith 1919: 557) note a Persian parallel in which the star Gurzihar falls to earth as a sign of the final judgment. In both instances, however, the parallels are more apparent than real, and it is better to see biblical parallels behind this.
- [11]. This term is normally feminine, but probably due to the fact that it is the name of the star, it is masculine in this instance.
- [12]. The reason we are told that “many died” rather than “one-third” is that the death total is reserved for the sixth trumpet judgment (9:17–19), which sums up the effects of all the trumpets. Thus a third of humankind do not die here, but rather part of the

total. This makes erroneous the view that “many” is a “stylistic alteration” for one-third (Kiddle 1961: 405; Mounce 1998: 181).

[13]. The attempt of Malina (1995: 139–41) to connect this with stars and planets of the zodiac that are linked with plants and affect human life is ingenious but far-fetched.

[14]. As Mounce (1998: 181 n. 26) brings out, this verb is used earlier in the plague accounts in Exod. 9:31–32 of the hail beating down or “destroying” (LXX ἐπλήγη) the crops.

[15]. At first glance 8:12a seems to state that the darkness is partial, for it is “a third of the sun” and the moon and the stars that are struck. This is only apocalyptic symbolism, however, for the rest of the verse makes clear that the darkness is total.

[16]. This second use of τὸ τρίτον is probably an accusative of time, “for a third” (of the day).

[17]. The verb κατέλαβεν (*katelaben*) can mean either “comprehend” or “overcome.” Partly on the basis of the use of the verb in John 12:35 (“before darkness overtakes you”), most believe it is better to see this as cosmic warfare, “the darkness cannot overcome it.”

c. Fifth Trumpet / First Woe (8:13–9:11)

[1]. Several (Beckwith, Thomas, BDF §247.2) have noted that εἷς (*heis*, one) in situations like this often stands for the indefinite article, “an eagle” rather than “a lone eagle” (cf. also 9:13; 18:21; 19:17).

[2]. For instance, Mounce (1998: 182) suggests that an eagle here would signify “strength and swiftness” while a vulture would symbolize “impending doom.”

[3]. There has often been speculation as to how an unclean bird could be God’s messenger, and indeed several (Caird, Krodel, Roloff) have said it is not a divine messenger but rather announces imminent judgment. This, however, is an unnecessary distinction. The eagle is a divine herald announcing to the world its imminent doom. That it is an unclean bird adds further symbolism to its message, for God is telling them of their own unclean state in his eyes.

[4]. In and of themselves, the two Hebrew terms translated by οὐαί (אָוַי, *hōy*, and וָוַי, *lōy*) are exclamatory particles that summon attention. But they are normally used for despair or coming judgment (see Harman, *NIDOTTE* 4:1032).

[5]. The preposition ἐκ (*ek*) is causal in its force, “woe . . . because of” the trumpets yet to come.

[6]. While μέλλω (*mellō*, about to) normally indicates imminence, it can also “express the necessity of an event that is based on the divine will and thus is certain to occur” (Radl, *EDNT* 2:404). This fits the context here quite well.

[7]. Mounce (1998: 184 n. 1) calls the perfect participle here a “dramatic perfect” and translates “that had just fallen.” However, this is a rare use found mostly in the indicative mood in narrative contexts (see Wallace 1996: 578). Porter (1994: 187–88) points out that temporal factors are often missing in substantival and adjectival participles, and that is likely the case here. This simply points out that the angel descended from heaven to earth and borrows the past time sense of the context.

[8]. Aune (1998a: 525, following Mussies) says the definite article means that the notion of “the shaft of the abyss” was well known to the readers.

[9]. This is most likely a genitive of source, “from a giant furnace.”

[10]. There is a graphic use of prepositions in ἐξῆλθον . . . εἰς (*exēlthon . . . eis*, went out . . . to). This pictures the locust plague leaving the abyss and going “to the earth.”

[11]. The Greek is somewhat clumsy but emphatic. God gave them power “as scorpions of the earth have power.” The emphasis is on what scorpions possess, namely natural (“of the earth”) “power” to inflict great pain on people.

[12]. The wording is somewhat surprising, with the “grass” mentioned generally but stressing “any” (πᾶν, *pan*) plant or tree, probably to be more specific on the plants. Moreover, “trees” were actually included in the general category of “plants” or “green things.” They are mentioned separately because of their presence in 8:7.

[13]. See 8:7 for the seeming contradiction between that verse (with all the grass burnt) and this one (with grass still present).

[14]. The two orders are related via parallel ἵνα (*hina*, that) clauses. This is a normal construction following commands, but here it follows ἐδόθη, which is unusual. The reason is probably that ἐδόθη is considered a command (“God gave them a command that . . .”) in this verse. The same construction is found in 6:4; 8:3.

[15]. For the future indicative after ἵνα, see 3:9. It is interesting that ἀποκτείνωσιν (*apokteinōsin*, kill) is an aorist subjunctive while βασιανισθήσονται is a future indicative. However, one should not read too much into this, for in both other occurrences of ἐδόθη ἵνα (6:4; 8:3), it is followed by a future indicative.

[16]. Μῆνας πέντε is an adverbial accusative of time stressing extent, “for five months.”

[17]. Some (Kiddle, Morris, Aune) look on this as a short period, while others (Beasley-Murray, Krodel) consider it a long period of time. In this context, however, a long or a short period is not stressed; rather the definiteness and divinely limited nature of the period is the emphasis.

[18]. This is the only time in Revelation that “in those days” appears in the book. While Thomas (1995: 33) is correct that this phrase could indicate prophecy, it is unlikely here because it is not a pattern in the book. Therefore, it simply indicates the period of time that the divine command was in force, namely the “days” when the locusts tormented the earth-dwellers.

[19]. There is another grammatical anomaly here: οὐ μὲ εὐρήσουσιν αὐτόν (*ou mē heurēsousin*, they never find it) is a construction (emphatic future negation) that normally has a subjunctive verb but once more is future indicative. Since John has done this often (see 9:5 above), the basic force (“never find it”) is still present.

[20]. This is better than opting for a futuristic present that would simply continue the force of the other verbs.

[21]. Most commentators point to an ancient Arabian proverb to illustrate the type of description found here, to the effect that locusts have a head like a horse, a breast like a lion, feet like a camel, a body like a serpent, and antennae like women’s hair.

[22]. Once more we have clumsy grammar. In the first and last comparisons (9:7a, 10), John uses ὅμοιος (*homoios*, like) for

comparison, but everywhere else in 9:7b–9 he uses ὥς (*hōs*, like, as). Here because John assumes the verb “to be” and uses ὅμοιος in the same clause, we must translate, “on their heads (they had) as it were crowns resembling gold.”

[23]. Some manuscripts (046 0207 94 1859 2020 et al.) replace χρυσῶ with χρυσοί. The evidence is stronger for χρυσῶ (2 A P 1006 1011 1611 et al.), however, so it is the more likely reading.

[24]. The genitive ἵππων is associative, “chariots drawn by horses.” In this sense, πολλῶν modifies the whole phrase and is best translated “many chariots drawn by horses.”

d. Sixth Trumpet (9:12–21)

[1]. This is shown especially by 11:14, which follows the interlude of 10:1–11:13 rather than the sixth trumpet judgment. While it does tie the interlude into the fifth and sixth trumpets, it leads more closely into what follows.

[2]. While ἔτι . . . μετὰ ταῦτα (*eti . . . meta tauta*, yet . . . after this) does not have to mean imminence, the presence of ταχύ (*tachy*, soon) in the parallel 11:14 favors an imminent thrust in 9:12 as well.

[3]. As in 8:13 (“an eagle”), μίαν (*mian*, one) here stands for the indefinite article, “a voice” rather than “a single voice.”

[4]. John uses ἐκ (*ek*, from) here to tell the source of the voice. It is doubtful whether one should read any strong difference into its meaning, that is, seeing the message come “from” the horns themselves or “out of” the altar behind the horns.

[5]. However, they are not identical to the four of 7:1. Those were at the corners of the earth, while these are “bound” at the Euphrates; and those held back the winds of destruction, while these release those forces. There is a closer parallel with the “four winds” than with the “four angels.”

[6]. A perfect participle in a past tense context often has pluperfect force, “had been made ready.”

[7]. Many modern prophecy buffs use these four to justify their attempts to calculate the exact time (or the year) of Christ’s return. This is hermeneutically impossible and the furthest thing from John’s mind here. The NT tells us not to try any such thing, for “no one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father” (Matt. 24:36). To pretend that this allows one to calculate the exact year for the parousia is nothing but literalistic hubris. The purpose here is clearly God’s calculation of the exact time, not ours.

[8]. Mussies (1967: 153) says that the prefix δις- follows the qualitative aspects of the Hebrew system and simply means “times” rather than doubling the number. That is unlikely here, for multiplication is already designated in “myriads of myriads.” Beale (1999: 509) states that the numbers are not meant literally but signify “an incalculable immensity” and that the prefix simply intensifies the idea. While the latter may be true, the Romans would also notice the comparison with their own legions and census figures.

[9]. Those who point to the size of modern armies like that of China, which is sometimes reported at 200 million, are missing the point. To get a similar effect, one would have to posit an army of *six billion* demonic cavalry today.

[10]. See Thomas (1995: 46) for a good argument against the troops being human rather than demonic.

[11]. Aune (1998a: 540) points out the chiasmic arrangement of 9:17b–18b:

A from their mouths
B proceeded
C fire and smoke and sulfur
D From these three plagues a third of humanity was killed
C’ from the fire and smoke and sulfur
B’ which proceeded
A’ from their mouths

[12]. Ἀπὸ and ἐκ are synonymous here, used for stylistic variation. Both show the source of the deaths, with the second specifying what “the three plagues” were.

[13]. As elsewhere, here there may well be double meaning: an “authority” given by God to rule for a time and a “power” to torment and kill their followers.

[14]. Aune (1998a: 541) provides a strong argument against any actual offer of repentance to the unbelievers here, stating that here and in 16:9–10 it appears in a context of judgment and in a negative sense of their refusal rather than in a context of mission. He believes the motif here derives from the plague story in Exodus (Exod. 7:13, 22; 8:15, 19, 32; 9:7, 12, 34–35; 10:1, 20; 11:9–10; 14:4) in contexts where Pharaoh’s repentance was never regarded as a possibility. In the seven letters, however, the term connotes an offer of repentance, and there is too much material in chaps. 6–16 on the mission to the nations (see on 11:9–13; 14:6–7) to deny that this connotes an offer to repent. Moreover, LaVerdiere (1999: 606) believes the plagues in Egypt did call on Pharaoh to repent, and I would have to agree that this is an implicit (though not ultimately provable) aspect of the Exodus account.

[15]. The καί (*kai*, and) between the two clauses following ἵνα (*hina*, that) is probably epexegetical, meaning “that they should not worship demons, namely idols.”

[16]. While δύναμαι normally means “able to” (= ability), in emphatic circumstances it can stress “having the power” to do something. This context is one of those occasions. Demons have no power.

[17]. Strangely, Elliott (1993: 272–73) believes that John did not so much wish to nullify magic or deny its power as to show that the “magic” of God is more powerful. Yet the whole diatribe of the book against pagan practices would obviate his theory. More correctly, Aune (1987: 494) asserts that the dominical sayings of Revelation (1:18; 2:16; 4:8; etc.) deliberately utilize the techniques of pagan magical divinatory rhetoric to develop an antimagical polemic: “The validity of the religious and magical assumptions behind them are implicitly denied” so that they “nullify the revelatory claims of the pagan competitors of the prophets.”

e. Interlude: Prophecy and Witness (10:1–11:13)

[1]. Giblin (1984: 434) calls this not so much an “interlude” as an “enlargement” in the sense that it clarifies and anticipates the future fulfillment of the fifth and sixth trumpets from the perspective of the saints. Its purpose is to encourage God’s people in light of the terrible nature of these trumpets.

i. John and the Little Scroll (10:1–11)

[1]. Some (Walvoord 1966: 170; Thomas 1995: 61) see the cloud also as a sign of judgment, since the cloud is a symbol of judgment in 1:7; 14:14, 15, 16. Since this scene is an interlude within the trumpet judgments, this is possible. It is unlikely here, however, because this vision does not concern the judgment of the unbelievers but rather God’s plan for the believers.

[2]. As stated in BAGD 696–97 and Mounce 1998: 202 n. 10, *πούς* in certain contexts can refer to the “leg.” With the image of “fiery pillars,” this is certainly such a context.

[3]. The presence of the participle *ἔχων* rather than the finite verb is commonplace in the book. In this instance it is probably parallel with *καταβαίνοντα* in 10:1, “a mighty angel descending . . . and having.” Beale (1999: 523) calls this a “stylistic Semitic indicator of OT allusions” linking together the images of 10:1, 2.

[4]. *Βιβλαρίδιον* is two steps removed from *βιβλίον*. It is the diminutive of *βιβλάριον*, which is the diminutive of *βιβλίον* (so Aune; BDAG 176 says *βιβλαρίδιον* and *βιβλάριον* are both diminutives of *βιβλος* and that *βιβλίδιον* is the diminutive of *βιβλίον*).

[5]. This is a better conclusion than that of Bauckham (1993b: 257–59), who says the little scroll means that God has turned from the limited judgments of the seals and trumpets to the suffering church (11:1–13) as his strategy to bring the nations to repentance. That could fit the refusal to repent in 9:20–21 vs. the repentance of 11:13, but it cannot explain the continued refusal to repent in 16:9, 11. Moreover, as Beale (1999: 531–32) says, the suffering of the church results in judgment more than in repentance. Interestingly, Feuillet (1967: 217–18) says the scroll of chap. 5 is the Jewish aspect detailing the plan of God for his chosen people, and the “little scroll” of chap. 10 is the Christian aspect.

[6]. Swete’s thesis (1911: 127) that the foot on the sea is to “defy its instability” in light of the meaning of sea in this book is highly unlikely. There is no basis for taking the sea as a symbol of the evil world here.

[7]. Some (e.g., Swete 1911: 127; Mounce 1998: 203) note that *μυκάται* is onomatopoeia for the “mooing” of cattle and so stressed “that the voice of the angel had not only volume but depth, at once compelling attention and inspiring awe” (Swete). However, this verb was often used for the roar of a lion, and this view probably overexegeses the term.

[8]. Aune (1998a: 559) believes that the anaphoric article refers not just to Ps. 29 but to the apocalyptic tradition in which “seven thunders” refers to the voice of God (at Sinai in Exod. Rab. 28.6 on Exod. 19:16) or even to Baal or the Pole Lords of Heaven in Greco-Roman magical tradition. This is certainly possible but difficult to prove.

[9]. Aune (1998a: 562–63) names several ancient texts where one aspect of a revelatory situation is kept secret (T. Sol. 6.6; Apoc. Zeph. 5.6; 2 Cor. 12:4; 2 Esdr. [4 Ezra] 14:5b–6; Josephus, *Ant.* 3.5.4 §90; 10.10.4 §210; Dan. 8:26, 12:4; 3 Bar. 1.7) and concludes that this lends credibility to the whole revelation and places the seer in a superior position to his readers. However, it seems more likely that the sovereignty of God is the thrust rather than the status of John.

[10]. Beale’s forceful argument that Deut. 32:40 is also behind this passage depends on the theory that the mighty angel of 10:1–11 is Christ himself (see the discussion in the additional note on 10:1).

[11]. Link (*NIDNTT* 3:738) suggests that the raising of the hand occurred from the beginning and stemmed from the very etymology of *ὀμνύω* (*omnyō*) and *ὄρκος* (*horkos*, oath), which in the time of Homer referred to raising one’s staff when swearing an oath. Aune (1998a: 564) says that the lifting of the hand indicates not only an oath but also active intervention by God.

[12]. Several (Caird, Bauckham, Beale) interpret this as the period of the church age. However, this depends on their “idealistic” view of the book (see the introduction for discussion of the idealistic and futuristic approaches to Revelation). My approach is a blend of the interpretive methods, so this period refers primarily to the final period of human history when the Antichrist reigns on earth but then applies on a secondary level to the suffering of the saints in John’s day and now.

[13]. Wallace (1996: 564) uses *ἔτελέσθη* as an example of the “proleptic aorist,” involving a “rhetorical transfer” in which a future event is looked on as though it were already past. The emphasis here is on the certainty of the “completion” of the mystery. This also fits the very meaning of the verb.

[14]. In the rest of the NT, many different things are called *μυστήριον*, such as the hardening of Israel (Rom. 11:25), the death of Christ (1 Cor. 2:1), the glorified body (1 Cor. 15:51), the lawless one (2 Thess. 2:7), the summing up of all things in Christ (Eph. 1:9), the inclusion of the Gentiles in the church (Eph. 3:3–6, Paul’s primary thrust of “mystery”), and the incarnation (1 Tim. 3:16).

[15]. Feuillet (1967: 222) calls this his “prophetic investiture,” building on the investiture of Ezekiel in Ezek. 3:1–3.

[16]. Note that once more the order in 10:9 (sour in the stomach, sweet in the mouth) is reversed in 10:10. This is always done for emphasis.

[17]. Some have said that this is a different commission than the ones in 1:11 or 4:1, e.g., that the earlier commissions related to chaps. 2–3 and 4–9 while this relates to chaps. 12–18, or that the commission of chap. 4 was to prophesy against Israel while here it is to prophesy against the nations. Neither view fits the details of the context. Each of the three “commissions” (4:1 is not truly a commission) are general rather than specific, and so they reinforce each other rather than relate to different aspects of the book.

[18]. For an excellent discussion arguing that *πολλοί* is not equivalent to *πᾶς* (*pas*, all) inclusively meaning “the whole world,” see Nebe, *EDNT* 3:132–33.

ii. John Measures the Temple and Altar (11:1–2)

- [1]. Reader (1982: 408–9) believes that John adapts a Zealot tract on the preservation of the temple during the Jewish War of A.D. 66–70. Thus, the surrender of the outer court and the Holy City symbolizes apostasy in the church (411).
- [2]. Strand (1984: 322–24) argues strongly for a third text as the primary background behind Rev. 11:1–2, Lev. 16, where the same three groups (the temple, the altar, and the worshipers; cf. Lev. 16:16–17, 18–19, 20–22) are “measured” or atoned for. But the problem with this is that there is no actual imagery of “measuring” in Lev. 16, and Strand reads too much into the parallels.
- [3]. It is possible (with Beale 1999: 563) to see this not as the altar of incense but as the altar of burnt offering, thus pointing to the “sacrifice” of the martyrs (6:9–11), perhaps in a priestly act of sacrificing themselves for the glory of God (cf. 1:6; 5:10). This is unnecessary, however, for as I said in 6:9, the heavenly “altar” combines both the sacrificial imagery of the burnt offering (6:9) and the worship imagery of the incense (8:3). Here again John may be combining both altars, with the sacrifice of the saints (the altar of burnt offering) part of the way they “worship” God (the altar of incense).
- [4]. The antecedent of αὐτῶ could be the temple (“worship in the temple”) or the altar (“worship at the altar”). Since “altar” is the nearer term, it might be the better antecedent, but both would refer to the worshipping community.
- [5]. Michaels (1996: 137 note on 11:1–2a) believes these “worshipers” are not earthly but heavenly (the elders and the living creatures) because the temple is heavenly while the outer court refers to the suffering on earth. However, this takes the spatial imagery beyond the intention of John. The heavenly temple here is a metaphorical depiction of the church, and the heavenly/earthly distinction should not be seen so literally.
- [6]. This would be a culminative aorist, stressing the results of the past action.
- [7]. In contrast, Chilton (1987: 273–74) argues that the outer court refers to unbelieving Israel that is “cast out” or excluded from the church while the unbelieving Gentiles are brought in. The problem with this is that the “Gentiles/nations” are the ones trampling the church.
- [8]. Bauckham’s argument that the “outer court” is the court of Israel rather than the outer court of Ezekiel’s temple is due to his belief that Ezekiel is not behind this passage. The “measuring” of the temple must refer to Ezek. 40–42, however, and therefore the command not to “measure” the outer court must be a reference to the Ezekiel imagery. It is likely that Rev. 11:1–2a alludes to Ezek. 40–42, while Rev. 11:2b alludes to Dan. 8:11–12 and Zech. 12:3.
- [9]. Some (Caird, P. Hughes, Beale) believe this refers symbolically to the period of the church age between the two advents of Christ, but the highly apocalyptic nature of the imagery makes it more likely a reference to the final period of eschatological judgment.

iii. Ministry, Death, and Resurrection of the Two Witnesses (11:3–13)

- [1]. Court (1979: 88–90) believes these symbolize the witnessing and dying church and argues that this provides a major step forward in the development of μάρτυς toward its second-century meaning of “martyr.” Considine (1946: 391–92) takes these as the “civil and religious powers” of the church, the preachers and teachers who combat the enemies of God’s people. Strand (1981) believes that this refers to the basic formula of the book, “the word of God” and “the testimony of Jesus” (1:2, 9; 6:9; 12:17). For him this means the OT and the NT messages. These interpretations are too allegorical; while the connotations fit the whole of chap. 11, they are inadequate as interpretations of the two witnesses themselves.
- [2]. Some think that Christ is the speaker, but since he is called “their Lord” in 11:8, it is more likely that God is the subject here. Moreover, God is normally the implied subject of the verb “to give” in Revelation.
- [3]. In keeping with his belief that the witnesses are the OT and NT messages, Strand (1982: 257–61) interprets the two lampstands as OT prophetic proclamation and NT gospel preaching.
- [4]. It is interesting that ἑστῶτες is masculine and therefore must modify “witnesses” in 11:3 rather than either “olive trees” or “lampstands” here, probably through the ο�ὗτοι (*houtoi*, these) that begins the verse.
- [5]. Note how John has juxtaposed τις and αὐτοῦς in order to stress the contrast between the earth-dwellers and the witnesses.
- [6]. Some (Feuillet 1964: 247–48; Aune 1998a: 616) point to the verbal similarities between this and 20:7 (“when the thousand years were completed, Satan was released from his prison”). Feuillet sees these as the same event and identifies the beast with Satan. This, however, is highly doubtful in light of chaps. 12–13, where the dragon/Satan sends the beast and gives him power (13:2b).
- [7]. Whether ἀναβαῖνον is a timeless present participle that describes the ascension of the beast throughout church history (so Beale 1999: 589) or a descriptive participle dramatically portraying the rise of the Antichrist in the final period of world history (paralleling the ascent in 13:1; so Thomas 1995: 93), depends on one’s larger view of the book. The latter seems more probable in light of the futuristic perspective in the book.
- [8]. Black (1978: 228–34, building on Bousset and R. Charles) believes that this is based more on Jewish legends regarding the death of Enoch and Elijah at the hands of the Antichrist (e.g., 1 Enoch 90.30–31; the Coptic Apoc. Elijah 3.90–99; 2 Esdr. [4 Ezra] 8:18–19; Pseudo-Philo, *Bib. Ant.* 48.1; Wis. 4:10; 55:1–5). The parallels are too tenuous, however, and this passage clearly centers on Moses and Elijah rather than on Enoch and Elijah (see also the introduction to this section).
- [9]. Note the singular “corpse” in 11:8. This is a common stylistic trait in this passage, paralleled by the singular “mouth” in 11:5. The emphasis is on the unity of the two witnesses; they function as one.
- [10]. Aune (1998a: 618) believes the articular τῆς πλατείας (*tēs plateias*, the street) refers to a particular street in Jerusalem. He points out that we know little of the street system in Herodian times but that among those parts of the city that have been excavated, it could be what has been dubbed “Tyropoeon Valley Street,” a street ten meters wide at the western side of the temple mount that held the central market of the city (see the other options, 618–19).
- [11]. De Villiers (1988: 133–35) says that if there is a historical referent, it must be Rome, since Jerusalem had been destroyed

twenty-five years before the book had been written. But it is primarily symbolic, and so the harlot, Babylon, Jerusalem, Sodom, Egypt, and Rome become a single symbol typifying “the evil forces that are responsible for the persecution of the church.”

[12]. Those who argue that the “great city” is nothing other than Jerusalem (Swete, Beckwith, Thomas) are correct about this verse but miss its connection with the rest of Revelation. In the narrow perspective of this passage, it is a fallen Jerusalem. In the broader context of the book as a whole, Jerusalem and Rome are fused into a single “great [note the irony] city.” Minear (1966: 98) calls this a “transhistorical model” that links the stories of all five “cities”—Sodom, Egypt, Babylon, Jerusalem, Rome—into a single apocalyptic vision of those who corporately reject God. In this sense, Giblin (1984: 439) calls it the “world city.”

[13]. Fekkes (1994: 176) denies the Isaianic allusion on the basis of his thesis that the “great city” is Rome rather than Jerusalem. However, that is to ignore the tendency of John to transform images to fit his context. Moreover, the allusion fits closely if Jerusalem and Rome are combined into a single image (see above).

[14]. Alternatively, the antecedent could be the subject of the immediately following verb in 11:9, “they see” (so Beale 1999: 593), stressing Christ as “Lord” also of the unbelievers who killed him (as in 1:5; 17:14; 19:16). This is possible, but it is better to see 11:8 as a whole, with the two possessive pronouns framing the verse and emphasizing the “fellowship of suffering” between Christ and his saints.

[15]. BDF §164.2 uses this as an example of partitive ἔκ (*ek*, some of), but this does not mean only “some of” the people around the world watched. More likely, it means people “from” all over the world participated in the celebration.

[16]. This idea of festive joy contrasts with the other two uses of the verb in Revelation, which speak of the festive “celebration” of the heavens over the destruction of the “great city” and the final victory of Christ (12:12; 18:20).

[17]. On the switch to aorist tenses in 11:11–12, see the additional note on 11:3–6, 11–12 below.

[18]. Interestingly, the verb cognate is used for the call to the nations to “fear God and give him glory” in 14:7, and in 11:13 (the cognate ἔμιοβοι) and 15:4 the nations respond, with many converted.

[19]. On the other hand, there could be no attempt at chronology on John’s part, and in that sense the resurrection of the witnesses would concur with the resurrection of the people of God as a whole. Those who repent in 11:13 would simply symbolize those who do respond to the prophetic ministry of the witnesses/church during the three and a half years. This is possible but in my view not as likely as the above scenario. There does seem to be a basic chronology in 11:1–13, from the appearance of the witnesses to their extensive ministry to their death to their resurrection to the earthquake and conversion of the onlookers. That chronology should be taken seriously.

[20]. Estimates on the size of Jerusalem in the first century have ranged from 30,000 to 150,000. The number here is approximately accurate but is probably symbolic both to fit the predominance of the numbers seven and one thousand in the book and to link this with the seven thousand in 1 Kings 19:18.

[21]. Beale (1999: 605) also argues that ἔμιοβοι refers to the “terror” of unbelievers, not to a godly fear; and Schnabel (1999: 8–9) adds that the noun in the Apocalypse always has a negative sense of being afraid of God (11:18; 18:10, 15). They are correct on this, but this is a terror that leads to a new awareness of the power of God and a new openness to the call to repentance that is inherent in all the judgments of this book. The combination of terror with glorifying God does not mean that they were simultaneous but rather that the one led to the other.

[22]. It is doubtful that οἱ λοιποὶ (*hoi loipoi*, the rest) here means that all the survivors in the scene were converted. Most likely it is rabbinic hyperbole for rhetorical effect and means many were converted. Feuillet (1964: 249–50, following Loisy) believes this parallels Rom. 11:25–26 and refers not to a general repentance but to the conversion of the Jewish people “at the end of time.” However, the thrust of Rev. 11 is to the whole world (cf. 11:9–10), not just to the Jewish people.

f. Seventh Trumpet (11:14–19)

[1]. See the discussion of the aorist “brought to completion” in n. 13 at 10:7. West (1999: 16) calls it a “prophetic past” but interprets it in a similar way.

[2]. While κύριος often refers to Christ in the book, it cannot do so here, for αὐτοῦ (“his Christ”) demands that the “Lord” here be God the Father.

[3]. Ford (1998: 221) says that here God and the Lamb have become co-regents.

[4]. In addition, the eternal punishment of the ungodly is stressed in 14:11; 19:3; and 20:10.

[5]. Roloff (1993: 137) notes the use of εὐχαριστέω in primitive Christian eucharistic worship (Did. 9.2, 3; 10.2, 4) and believes this alludes to the theme of victory in early eucharistic prayers. However, the resemblance to such prayers is too slight (only the one word) to make this convincing.

[6]. This is the only perfect tense and is followed by a series of aorists. Morris (1987: 149) may be right that the emphasis is “God has taken his power permanently.” As Zerwick (1963: §285) puts it, the perfect describes the “state of affairs” resulting from an action. Aspect theory would make this the state of affairs that provides the “foreground” or key aspect that makes the action possible (Porter 1994: 23, 302–3).

[7]. The aorist ἐβασίλευσας is most likely an ingressive aorist identifying the beginning of an action. Aspect theory (see n. 6) would make this the background to the action. God’s judgment (11:18) finds its basis in his reign over the nations.

[8]. The force of the aorist ἦλθεν (*ēlthen*, has come) could be similar to those in 10:11–12, looking at the future event as so certain that it is treated as a completed action; but more likely it parallels “begun to reign” in the immediately preceding clause and looks at the beginning of his judgment.

[9]. Here we have another example of *lex talionis* (the law of retribution). God’s wrath is his just response to the wrath of the nations, for their wrath is the result of self-centered sin, while his is the result of holy justice.

[10]. The article concretizes the “reward” to be specifically the final reward from God at the last judgment (see on 20:12).

[11]. As to whether these “prophets” are OT prophets, they are connected with “apostles” in 18:20, and in 22:9 John is linked to “your brothers and sisters the prophets.” Therefore, it is more likely that NT prophets are in mind in the passages discussing “the saints and prophets.”

[12]. The switch to the accusative case (even though “small and great” is in apposition with the datives “to your servants the prophets and the saints, namely those who fear your name”) is clumsy. As a result, some manuscripts (ⲓⲥ p 046 and many minuscules) have changed it to a dative so that it will agree with the preceding. However, the accusative simply has too much external support (ⲓⲥ⁴⁷ ⲓⲥ* A C 2321 et al.) and is also the more difficult reading. Thomas (1995: 115) is probably correct in labeling this an “anacoluthon” or syntactical inconsistency, possibly for dramatic effect in order to emphasize the universality of the reward for the faithful.

[13]. The idea of “fearing” God in Revelation does not mean simply “reverence” for his name. While it is connected to worship in 15:4 and 19:5, it is linked to the process of conversion in 14:7 (“Fear God and give him glory”). Also, the cognate **ἰόβος** (*phobos*, fear) refers to the terror of the earth-dwellers in 11:11; 18:10, 15 (the only three times it appears in the book). In the context of 11:18, it probably refers to the “awe” (a combination of fear and reverence) the saints feel toward God. Finally, it could refer to the “fear” or responsibility the saints feel as they realize their responsibility to persevere in their faithfulness, a major theme in this book.

[14]. This is similar to the tearing of the veil at the death of Christ (Mark 15:38 par.), which many think also symbolized judgment. Thus, the “opening” of the heavenly temple here as well could picture another tearing of the veil.

1. Interlude: Great Conflict Described (12:1–14:20)

[1]. On the basis of the series of introductory formulas καὶ εἶδον (*kai eidon*, and I saw) and καὶ ἰδοὺ (*kai idou*, and behold), Beale (1999: 617) believes this section should be extended to 15:4. These are general formulas, however, and should not become the basis of major sections. In one sense 15:1–4 is a transition passage but is more closely related to 15:5–8 as an introduction to the bowl judgments. In this sense 15:1–8 parallels 8:2–5 as a conclusion to what precedes but even more as preparatory material for the seven judgments that follow.

[2]. On the other hand, many (Mounce, Kroll, Beale) also see the middle section (12:7–12) as explanatory of the opposition between the dragon and God, resulting in an ABA pattern: 12:13–17 expands 12:1–6 while the middle section (12:7–12) interprets the whole. I see a closer relationship between 12:4a and 12:7–12, however, and so prefer the explanation here.

a. Conflict between the Dragon and God as Well as His People (12:1–13:18)

i. The Woman and the Dragon (12:1–6)

[1]. Pétrement (1965: 295–96) takes the woman to be the Holy Spirit, based on parallels in *Hermas* and the Gospel of the Hebrews. But there is no evidence in 12:1–6 for such a view. Yarbro Collins (1993: 20–22) sees her as the mother goddess, because her attributes (sun, moon, stars) identify her as a cosmic queen controlling the heavens. But Jewish parallels to the birth of the Messiah are much closer (so Bruns 1964: 460).

[2]. Stevenson (1995: 257–59) notes the three types of crowns in the book: the organic wreath (2:10; 3:11; 6:2; 12:1), the diadem or ruler's crown (12:3; 13:1; 19:12), or the golden wreath (4:4, 10; 9:7; 14:14). The στεφανος (*stephanos*, crown) was a victor's wreath, made of grass, twigs, or some type of foliage as well as gold for special occasions (laurel and ivy were especially prized of the gods). It was used for victory, religious blessing, or as a badge of high office. In contrast, the διάδημα (*diadēma*, diadem, crown) signified royalty.

[3]. The present tenses of the participles make the painful distress all the more dramatic.

[4]. The present tense is startling because the other main verbs of 12:3–4 are aorists. The present tense is dramatic, picturing the action as it occurs.

[5]. This is another strange concatenation of tenses, as 12:4 moves from the present σύρει to the aorist ἔβαλεν to the perfect ἔστηκεν and then to the present participle μελλούσης, followed by the aorist infinitive τεκεῖν and the aorist subjunctives τέκη and κατα□άγη. This frequent switching of tenses is a feature of this book and keeps the readers' attention on the story. The perfect tense “stood” is probably intensive, emphasizing the state of affairs resulting from the past rebellion, seen in the aorist “threw.”

[6]. Μελλούσης (*mellousēs*, about to) primarily refers to the imminence of the child's birth but could also stress divine necessity, as it often does in the Apocalypse (see 3:10, 16; 6:11; 10:7; 12:5). In other places it is virtually equivalent to a future tense (2:10; 8:13; 10:4; 17:8). When there is a strong connection with the sovereign will of God (see BAGD 501), however, there is a sense of “destined, inevitable.” Since this is the birth of the Messiah, that sense could well be here.

[7]. There is another grammatical incongruity, as the neuter adjective ἄρσεν modifies the masculine noun υἱόν. Beale (1999: 641) makes a convincing case that this is deliberate, since the correct masculine form is used in 12:13. As such, it draws attention to the allusion to Isa. 66:7, where the neuter ἄρσεν is used (see below).

[8]. Fekkes (1994: 183–84) sees ἄρσεν as drawn from Isa. 66:7 and υἱόν as drawn from Ps. 2:7, which adds a messianic flavor to the context.

[9]. This is another dramatic aorist, stressing the completeness of the action.

[10]. Beale (1999: 646–47) argues that the “three and a half years” begins with the death of Christ, as established by the reference to the death of Christ in 11:8; 12:5; and 13:3. That interpretation is highly questionable, however, and it is more likely that the death of Christ is mentioned (though it is implicit at best in 12:5 and 13:3) to align the suffering of the witnesses/church with “the fellowship of suffering” with Christ (Phil. 3:10).

[11]. The use of ἀπό after a passive voice verb is fairly common (e.g., Luke 1:26; James 1:13). Wallace (1996: 433; cf. also BDF §210.2) calls this “ultimate agency,” referring to the one who is ultimately responsible for the action. Some older minuscules (1611, 2351, etc.) have replaced ἀπό with ὑπό.

ii. War in Heaven (12:7–12)

[1]. There is a clear parallel between the war on earth described in 12:5–6, 13–17 and the war in heaven in 12:7–9. The latter is the basis for the former. God's defeat of the dragon in heaven and the expulsion of the dragon to earth guarantees the final result of the war on earth.

[2]. There is an extremely clumsy expression here, with the nominative ὁ Μιχαὴλ καὶ οἱ ἄγγελοι αὐτοῦ (*ho Michaēl kai hoi angeloi autou*, Michael and his angels) followed by the articular infinitive τοῦ πολεμῆσαι rather than a finite verb. While this could be a result clause (“there was war in heaven, with the result that Michael and his angels made war”), that would not explain the nominative, since the subject of an infinitive should be in the accusative. After an extensive study, Beale (1999: 653) concludes that it could be a Septuagintalism stemming from a literal translation of a Hebrew *lamed* prefix followed by an infinitive (see Hos. 9:13; Ps. 24:14 LXX), thus meaning “Michael and his angels had to make war”; or there could be an implicit ἐγένετο (*egeneto*, there was) from the first clause, thus “there was war in heaven; Michael and his angels went to make war.” The latter makes most sense here.

[3]. Because of the amount of Jewish material on Michael as a courtroom advocate, some (e.g., Beale 1999: 661–62) see the defeat of Satan in 12:7–10 as more a courtroom disbarment than a military expulsion from heaven. However, that is to take parallels too far. The imagery in 12:7–10 is mostly military, with the idea of the “accuser” adding a juridical metaphor to the mix.

[4]. Some (R. Charles, Kiddle, Thomas) argue that the “loud voice” is that of the martyrs in 6:9–11, since they also cried with a “loud voice” (see also 7:10, where the saints in heaven cry out with a “loud voice”) and since the saints are called “brothers and sisters” in 12:10. As Beasley-Murray (1978: 203) points out, however, the “loud voice” is more often uttered by the angelic orders, and “the kinship between angels and the people of God is presumed in 22:9”: “I am a fellow slave with you and with your brothers and sisters the prophets” (also 19:10).

[5]. The definite article before each of the four nouns in this list is probably anaphoric, pointing back to the use of these concepts elsewhere in the book.

[6]. Beale (1999: 657–58) argues strongly that “kingdom” here reflects inaugurated eschatology and refers to the kingdom resulting from the death and resurrection of Christ rather than the final kingdom, as seen in “by the blood of the Lamb” in 12:11 and the statement of 12:12 that “the devil has gone down to [the earth]” (based on Beale’s thesis that the expulsion of the dragon occurred at the death and resurrection of Jesus (see above on 12:7–9). However, the “blood of Jesus” explains how the saints triumphed over the dragon, not when God’s triumph occurred; and the rest of 12:11 describes the martyrs of the last days. Moreover, I believe that the expulsion of Satan occurred at the dawn of history. Therefore, as I have maintained elsewhere (see comments on 12:7), 12:10–12 continues the telescoping of the three bindings of Satan into a single salvation-historical event.

[7]. This is probably a subjective genitive, stressing the “authority” exercised by Christ in the divine victory over the forces of evil.

[8]. In the NT the term nearly always (22 of 23 times) has a judicial function, used of the desire of Jesus’ opponents to “accuse” him (e.g., Mark 3:2) or of the charges brought against Paul (e.g., Acts 22:30).

[9]. Aune (1998a: 703) notes that τῆς μαρτυρίας is a genitive of apposition (or an epexegetical genitive) of τὸν λόγον, “indicating that ‘their testimony’ is a further specification of ‘the word.’”

[10]. Lohmeyer (1926: 101) argues that αὐτῶν is an objective genitive (God witnesses about them) rather than subjective (they witness to their faith in God and Christ). This is similar to the debate regarding “the testimony of Jesus” in 1:2, 9, but in this context the subjective is more likely.

[11]. Some (e.g., Sweet 1979: 202) believe that this is the actual third “woe,” since the woe of 11:14 did not introduce a judgment oracle. However, this is not a judgment sent from God like the others but the descent of an angry Satan upon the unbelieving world (so Mounce 1998: 239).

[12]. Some later manuscripts (1 pc) add τοῖς κατοικοῦσιν before “the earth” to emphasize the earth-dwellers here. That is not necessary, however, and the weight of manuscript evidence is against it.

iii. War on Earth (12:13–17)

[1]. The third plural is an example of the indefinite plural used as a circumlocution for God; see Zerwick 1963: §2.

[2]. This is an example of εἰς (eis, into) as equivalent to πρὸς (pros, to); see Zerwick 1963: §97.

[3]. R. Charles (1920: 1.330) believes this is a Hebraic idiom that modifies “nourished” and should be translated either “at a distance from” or preferably “because of.” In other words, she is nourished by God because of the presence of the serpent. This is a real possibility, but the more literal rendering makes better sense here (see BAGD 721.α.).

[4]. Επί with ὀργίζομαι notes the direction of the anger, “to be angry at” (BAGD 579).

(1) The Beast from the Sea—the Antichrist (12:18–13:10)

[1]. For a good argument for including this verse with chap. 12, see Michaels (1997: 154–55), who argues that chap. 13 should properly begin with the emergence of the beast from the sea. While this has merit, I believe the dragon should be seen as calling him from the sea, and so the verse should begin chap. 13. Either way, this statement ties chap. 13 closely to 12:17.

[2]. Aune (1998a: 732) argues that the anarthrous form of θηρίον here means first that the articular form in 11:7 is a later interpolation. That is unnecessary, for the articular form in 11:7 would be anaphoric, pointing to the fourth beast of Dan. 7, while the anarthrous form here would be qualitative, stressing the characteristics of the “beast” as enumerated in this chapter.

[3]. In Palestine, Herod the Great built a temple to the “ancestral deities” (Roma and Augustus) in Caesarea Maritima, and Pontius Pilate also built a chapel or Tiberium in honor of Tiberius in that same city.

[4]. A “blow” or “wound” is the basic meaning of πληγή, while the use of the term for “plague” in the trumpet and bowl judgments (9:18, 20; 15:1, 6; 16:9, 21) is a figurative use of the term. Those who see this “wound” as a judgment from God are probably taking the connection too far. It is entirely another of the counterfeit miracles of the dragon and the beast.

[5]. Wilson (1993: 600) gives a preterist interpretation of this when he says the head that receives the mortal wound is Julius Caesar, whose death ended the Roman republic. The healing then is the empire that arose from the civil war that resulted from his death.

[6]. Beale (1999: 676) believes this is not an end-time event but refers to the “mortal blow” struck at the cross and resurrection of Jesus. However, that was the defeat of Satan/the dragon rather than the defeat of the Antichrist, and the imagery does not fit the atmosphere of this passage or the description here.

[7]. The καί (kai, and) is epexegetical, further defining the “great things” as “blasphemies.”

[8]. ποιῆσαι (poiēsai, do, make) means to “exercise” authority.

[9]. The present participle σκηνοῦντας occurs in a context of aorists (13:6–7) and so is emphatic, again providing the foreground (see 13:5) or emphatic position. The heaven-dwellers are highlighted as the truly important group in the verse.

[10]. Michaels (1997: 159) argues that the phrase refers to angels “viewed as heavenly counterparts to Christian believers on earth.” In 12:12 I argued that the heaven-dwellers are both angels and saints, and Michaels’s view would fit that. Here, however, in

the contrast between them and the earth-dwellers (13:8), the saints are primarily in view.

[11]. The entire clause is missing in several ancient manuscripts (□⁴⁷ A C P 2053 etc.) but is most likely a sight error, as the scribe went from the first ἔδόθη to the third, skipping this middle clause.

[12]. Τῆς ζωῆς is an epexegetical genitive, describing the contents of the book as dealing with eternal life, the possession of the saints.

[13]. Ancient scribes were troubled by this grammatical irregularity and tried to solve it by changing οὓ to ὧν (□⁴⁷ B C P 046 etc.). However, the preferable reading is οὓ ([A ouai] C 1828 1854 2053 etc.), since scribes would hardly change a sensible reading to a grammatically more difficult form.

[14]. Τοῦ ἀρνίου (*tou arniou*, of the Lamb) could be a genitive of source, indicating that the book derived from the Lamb, or perhaps a subjective genitive, indicating that the Lamb wrote the names in the book. It is more likely, however, that is a simple possessive, indicating that the book “belongs to” the Lamb.

(2) The Beast from the Earth—the False Prophet (13:11–18)

[1]. Contra Mounce (1998: 255), who says the first beast parodies Christ, not the second. But there is no reason why the second beast could not also imitate Christ, and the combination of “lamb” and “horn” is too similar to 5:6 to be ignored.

[2]. The imperfect εἶχεν (*eichen*, was having) is dramatic, stressing the ongoing nature of the beast.

[3]. Michaels (1997: 163) says that these verbs are present tenses and that “what he saw was in some sense going on in the Roman Empire even as he wrote.” That is certainly true, but in the ongoing nature of the whole narrative, that was only part of the message. Like the destruction of Jerusalem in the Olivet discourse (Mark 13 par.), the seductive power of Rome and its idolatrous practices (see on 2:14–15, 20–25) are a proleptic anticipation of the final empire of the beast.

[4]. The use of the ἵνα (*hina*, that) clause parallels the main infinitive and is epexegetical: “performs great signs, *namely* causing fire to descend from heaven.”

[5]. This is the fourth time “those who dwell on the earth” occurs in this passage (13:8, 12, 14 [twice]), the greatest concentration of any section of the book. John’s purpose is undoubtedly to anchor the fact that the power of the evil trinity is restricted to the earth (Satan is only “the god of this world,” 2 Cor. 4:4) and to show that they have influence only over those whose focus is earthly rather than heavenly.

[6]. While this “image” could be a coin with the likeness of the emperor on it, here it is almost certainly an idolatrous statue, since it is given life and speaks (13:15).

[7]. The subject is not the false prophet but the idol itself that causes the execution of all who refuse to worship it.

[8]. The strange wording ἵνα δώσιν αὐτοῖς (*hina dōsin autois*, that they might give them) switches from the singular “he makes” to the plural “they give.” There are two possible solutions: it could be an indefinite plural (see Zerwick 1963: §§1–6), or it could signify that the whole false trinity makes the demand. The difficult grammar complicates this further, for elsewhere (13:12, 13) the ἵνα clause is equivalent to an infinitive with the object of ποιεῖ (*poiei*, make) as the subject, i.e., “to make everyone to.” But αὐτοῖς is equivalent to “everyone.” Therefore, it is probably an indefinite plural, and ἵνα δώσιν αὐτοῖς has the meaning “to give them a mark.”

[9]. It has also been suggested that this was the emperor’s likeness that “sealed” Roman coins and allowed a person to buy or sell goods in the marketplace. However, this could hardly fit the command to mark the forehead and the hand with this “seal.”

[10]. Swete (1911: 174) notes correctly that ἢ (*ē*, or) is not disjunctive but introduces an apposition, meaning “that is.”

[11]. Ἀνθρώπου is probably not generic (“human”), since that would simply mean it was open to human understanding or, with Beale (1999: 723–24), would mean “for it is the number of humanity.” But in that sense the beast would simply be the sum of human depravity; and as I argued above, the NT evidence for an actual Antichrist figure appearing in human history is too strong. Therefore, it refers to a particular “person,” probably identifying the Antichrist with a certain individual.

[12]. However, 616 might also have appeared in some manuscripts to identify the beast with Caligula, whose name (“Gaius Caesar”) in Greek adds up to 616.

b. Song of the 144,000 (14:1–5)

[1]. The use of the perfect participle, here ἑστώς (*hestos*, having stood), for an indicative verb is common in the Apocalypse. For a list, see the additional note on 1:16.

[2]. Note the switch from the aorist main verbs of 14:1–2 to the present ᾄδουσιν (*adousin*, they are singing) of 14:3. This is a dramatic use of the present to fit the present participle “playing harps” in 14:2b. We are back to the past tense in 14:3b (“were able to”).

[3]. The substantival perfect participle ἡγορασμένοι (*ēgorasmenoi*, have been redeemed) emphasizes the resultant state, namely that these victorious saints are the redeemed by the blood of the Lamb (5:9). On the basis of aspect theory, this would also be the “frontgrounding” (Porter 1994: 23) or important element in the discourse. These “redeemed” saints are the focus of the statement.

[4]. The aorist passive ἐμολύνθησαν has permissive force, “did not allow themselves to be polluted.”

[5]. Pippin (1992: 80) takes this literally as a stance against women in general: “The apocalypse is not a safe space for women.” For Schüssler Fiorenza (1991: 88), however, this is unlikely because “such a misogynist stance appears nowhere else in Revelation.”

[6]. Taking these as indirect objects (“to”) rather than instrumental datives (“by”) both because agency is normally expressed by ὑπό (*hypo*, by) rather than the dative (cf. 6:8, 13) and because in the parallel 5:9 Christ purchased them “for God.”

c. Message of Three Angels (14:6–13)

- [1]. Aune (1998a: 825) believes that this does not connote “gospel” but a “message.” However, the anarthrous form often emphasizes a qualitative aspect (Harris 1992: 303–5; Porter 1994: 104–5, who take this as the basic force of the anarthrous noun), and here it does not have to indicate a nonspecific secondary meaning but rather the theological significance of “gospel” as the eternal “good news” from God.
- [2]. As Aune (1998a: 831) points out, it was generally known that Alexander had planned to make Babylon the capital of his empire, and “the great city” links apostate Jerusalem and Rome (11:8) together as “Babylon,” the capital city of the Antichrist.
- [3]. For those literalists who speak of a rebuilding of ancient Babylon in the end times, Heater (1998: 233–43) presents an extensive exegesis of the OT background. He concludes that the prophecies of Babylon’s destruction in Isa. 13 and Jer. 25 and 50–51 are presented with language too strong to allow such. Thus, Babylon must be a symbol here.
- [4]. However, Beale interprets τοῦ θυμοῦ as “passion” for immorality. In that sense, he is also open to a descriptive sense of the NIV. Chilton (1987: 363) translates it “heat,” a stronger form of “passion.”
- [5]. A ninth, 18:3 (“the wine of the wrath of her adulteries”), is a doublet of 14:8 and depends on the interpretation here.
- [6]. Beale may be correct in taking τῆς πορνείας as another genitive of purpose, “passion that leads to immorality,” though it might better be seen as an objective genitive, “a passion for her immorality.” Also, Beale’s economic understanding of this “passion” for Babylon (1999: 756–57) is certainly correct for 13:15–17; 17:4; 18:3, 7, 9, 11–16, but it is not emphasized in this context.
- [7]. The use of the condition of fact—with the verb in the indicative mood—εἰ (ei, if) assumes the reality of the premise. The nations do indeed worship the Antichrist in this final period of history.
- [8]. This is also highlighted by the emphatic use of αὐτός (autos, he himself). As Aune (1998a: 833) explains, all eleven occurrences of καὶ αὐτός in Revelation are emphatic (see 3:20; 6:11; 14:10, 17; 17:11; 18:6; 19:12, 15 [twice]; 21:3, 7). In other words, those who participate in the depravity of Babylon will “themselves” certainly face the divine wrath.
- [9]. Also, ἀνάπαυσις occurs only in 4:8 and here in the Apocalypse, highlighting the contrast even further. The living creatures “never cease” singing praise, while the unsaved will “never cease” suffering.
- [10]. However, some (BDF §12.3; Aune 1998a: 788) believe that ἀπ’ ἄρτι should read ἀπαρτί (surely, certainly) and introduce the following clause, “Certainly, says the Spirit.” This requires the omission of ναί, which would be redundant if the clause began with “surely.” Therefore, while this is possible, it is not as likely as the more traditional rendering.
- [11]. Conversely, some (Beasley-Murray 1978: 227) argue that “from now on” refers not to believers but to the “now” of Christ’s work of redemption, or that it should be translated “assuredly” and have no time reference at all.
- [12]. Some manuscripts (051 □) have δέ (the parallel to explanatory γάρ), suggesting that this was a common interpretation.
- [13]. Like ἀναβαίνει (anabainei, is going to ascend) in 14:11, ἀκολουθεῖ is a prophetic present emphasizing the certainty of their reward.

d. Harvest of the Earth (14:14–20)

- [1]. Kroll (1989: 272–73) mentions two other possible views: the first (14:14–16) could be general, referring to the harvest of both the righteous and the wicked, with 14:17–20 specifically addressing the judgment of the wicked; or it could refer to all except the followers of the Lamb (including those who respond at the last minute; cf. 11:13; 14:6–7). Caird (1966: 191–92) and Feuillet (1972: 225–30) have a fifth option, that this refers to the “ingathering” of the martyrs by God. Feuillet argues that since the grapes are trampled “outside the city,” this is a reference to the blood of Christ as shared by the blood of the martyrs. This, however, is highly unlikely, for the imagery of judgment in 14:17–20 is too strong to restrict it to the “blood” of the martyrs.
- [2]. The νεφέλη λευκή (nephelē leukē, white cloud) that begins the vision is a pendant nominative that introduces the statement for emphasis and then is clarified further in what follows.
- [3]. Beale (1999: 777–78) and Schnabel (1999: 14) argue that since Joel 3:12–13 pictures only judgment, that must be the intention here, since Revelation is always consistent with the OT context. As stated here, however, the harvest of the saints is part of the judgment imagery of Revelation and is not inconsistent with the Joel passage (see also the use of Zech. 12:10 in Rev. 1:7).
- [4]. Here ἔχων is another of the many examples of an independent use of the participle as a finite verb in the book (see also 1:16; 4:7; 12:2; 17:3; 19:12; 21:14).
- [5]. The aorist verbs of the two ὅτι clauses are again proleptic aorists emphasizing the certainty that the time ἦλθεν (ēlthen, has come) and the harvest ἐξηράνθη (exēranthē, has become ripe), cf. 10:7; 14:8.
- [6]. Beale (1999: 774–75) provides an excellent summary of the argument that the two harvests of 14:14–16 and 14:17–20 are both images of judgment. First, there are nearly identical details: (1) an angelic figure comes from the temple/altar and (2) commands with a loud voice that the sickle be used (3) because “the harvest is ripe.” Both allude to Joel 3:13, a judgment oracle (see also Jer. 51:33; 2 Bar. 70.2; Zech. 5:1–3 LXX), and “because the hour to harvest has come” in Rev. 14:15 echoes 14:7 (“the hour of judgment has come”). These are weighty arguments and certainly show the viability of the judgment theory for 14:14–16 as well. In my opinion, however, the differences between the two accounts (as stated here) outweigh these arguments and make the view of a dual harvest of the redeemed and the unredeemed more likely. It is Christ, not an angel, who wields the sickle in 14:14–16, and the harvest is the “firstfruits” of that to come.
- [7]. Scribes also attempted to “correct” the solecism. Several (1854 1006² TR et al.) alter it to the feminine τὴν μεγάλην in order to conform it with τὴν ληνόν. Others connect it with τοῦ θυμοῦ τοῦ θεοῦ by altering the adjective to τοῦ μεγάλου (□⁴⁷ 1611 1773 et al.).

a. Introduction to the Bowls—Angels with Final Plagues (15:1–8)

[1]. However, I do not follow Beale in separating 15:1–4 from 15:5–8, with vv. 1–4 the seventh vision of 12:1–15:4. The presence of 15:1 (the angels with the plagues) makes it more likely that vv. 1–4 are part of the introduction to chap. 16 than part of that previous interlude.

[2]. This does not mean, of course, that the deeds of wrath are completely over, for the wrath of Armageddon occurs in chap. 19 and the wrath of the great white throne judgment in 20:11–14. But it does mean that the outpouring of wrath in the bowl judgments “completes” the three judgment septets and ushers in the eschaton.

[3]. The anarthrous form highlights the qualitative nature of the scene, bringing out especially the apocalyptic connotations in the “sea of glass.” The ὠς phrases in Revelation tend to be anarthrous.

[4]. Farrer (1964: 171) takes them as “the fires of the Spirit,” but in this context of judgment his view is not likely.

[5]. Some (Farrer 1964: 171; Sweet 1979: 239) see a further link between the Red Sea and the “baptismal waters” of the believer, but that hardly seems likely here. There is no exegetical basis for such a connection in this vision.

[6]. The presence of ἐπί (epi, on) could connote that they stand “beside” the sea, but the image is too concrete, and it is better to visualize them standing “on” the sea of glass, pictured as the floor of heaven emerging from the throne of God in 4:6. Beale (1999: 791) believes that the picture of the saints “standing” also connotes the idea of resurrection, since it is connected to the Lamb “standing” in 5:6 and the multitude “standing before the throne” in 7:9. With the idea of conquering, harps, and the song of victory, this is indeed viable.

[7]. I agree with Wall (1991: 193) that while John has “a special interest in the status of those believers who have been killed for refusing to worship the beast (cf. 13:15), this community includes all who belong to the Lamb (cf. 14:4). Membership in the eschatological community does not require martyrdom, only fidelity.”

[8]. Moses is here called “God’s slave” as a paradigm of all the faithful “slaves of God” in the Apocalypse (1:1; 7:3; 10:7; 11:18; 19:2; 5:22; 3:6). Those who serve God will be the victors.

[9]. However, Bauckham (1993b: 303–4) believes that ἅγιος is a quality that can be shared by the people of God, while ὁσιος is “the uniquely divine holiness, the quality that characterizes God as the only true God.” This is possible, but ἅγιος is used in passages on the holiness of God and Christ that are quite parallel to this one (3:7; 4:8; 6:10), so it appears that they are synonymous.

[10]. Another good possibility is to take the second ὅτι clause not as a parallel causal clause but as a subordinate result clause (so Beale 1999: 797; cf. BAGD 589). In other words, it is the consequence of the first; the holiness of God produces worship among the nations.

[11]. Mounce (1998: 287 n. 17, following Rist 1957) continues the argument considered before in this commentary that this cannot refer to an actual conversion of the nations because elsewhere they are the subject of judgment rather than salvation. Thus, this must refer to forced “acknowledgment of his power and might.” However, that fails to meet not only the strong imagery of “come and worship” in this verse but the themes of judgment and salvation discussed in this paragraph.

[12]. Fekkes (1994: 200) believes this is the primary text behind 15:8 because only in Isa. 6:4 does the smoke “fill” the “temple.” He believes there is an intertextual link with Rev. 4:8, where the holiness of God (alluding to Isa. 6:2–3) prepares for his judgment here.

b. Seven Last Bowl Judgments (16:1–21)

[1]. The present imperative is dynamic, picturing the ongoing outpouring of judgment in the bowls.

[2]. The imperfect ἐξεχέειν (execheen, was pouring out) carries on the present tense imperative “continue to pour out” in 16:1 and will be continued in each of the angel’s “pouring out” the bowls in the judgments that follow. It is dynamic and pictures each angel pouring the judgment upon the nation.

[3]. The singular here is collective, referring not to a single sore on each person but to many such sores breaking out on the earth-dwellers.

[4]. Ζῶνς is a qualitative genitive, “living creature.”

[5]. Beagley (1987: 85–86) believes that these condemned people are specifically Jewish persecutors of the church, exemplified in the OT imagery utilized here. For him, “Babylon” is Jerusalem. The emphasis on all the “nations” throughout the Apocalypse makes this thesis improbable.

[6]. Betz also argued that the origins of this theme and of apocalypticism in general are to be found in Hellenistic-Jewish syncretism. Against this, Staples (1972) finds the origin of this hymn in the prophetic-theocratic traditions of the OT and of Israel. Thus, OT themes and traditional Judaism are at the core. For this conclusion, see also Giesen 1997: 351.

[7]. There have been several translations of the ὅτι clause. Some (NIV, RSV, REB) take this as a dependent clause, “in these judgments” (NLT, “in sending this judgment”), or as a separate clause (JB), “This is a just punishment.” However, the parallel with 11:17 shows that this should indeed be taken as a causal clause. It is the ground or reason why the justice of God has been demonstrated.

[8]. A few manuscripts (□⁴⁷ 2329 pc) replace ὁ before ὁσιος with καὶ, thus turning it into an adjective parallel to δίκαιος and making the two synonymous. While this is unlikely, it does clarify the meaning and connection between “righteous” and “holy.”

[9]. Aune (1998a: 856) considers “you have judged these things” (NRSV) the “least acceptable translation” because it is unclear. When seen in light of 16:6, however, it is not at all unclear.

[10]. It is difficult to know whether the OT prophets are in mind. The order may favor these being NT prophets. But the motif of killing the prophets is especially connected with OT prophets (1 Kings 19:10; 2 Chron. 36:16; Neh. 9:26; Jer. 2:30; 26:8; Matt. 5:11–12 par.; 23:30–31, 37; Acts 7:52; Rom. 11:3; 1 Thess. 2:15). Thus, it is likely that these are NT prophets whose suffering is linked with that of the OT prophets.

- [11]. R. Charles (1920: 2.120–23) makes several mistakes here. First, he places 16:5–7 after 19:4 because he does not think these verses belong in chap. 16. Second, the reason he does so is that he misinterprets this passage as civil war between Rome and its allies, thinking the αὐτοῖς means they will drink “one another’s blood.” Third, he believes the author himself has misunderstood the αὐτοῖς to mean “their blood” (i.e., of the saints and prophets). However, the more natural sense taken here is a great deal more likely.
- [12]. This is another example of the generic use of ὁ ἄνθρωπος for “people.”
- [13]. Καῦμα (*kauma*, scorching heat) occurs in both 7:16 and 16:9, so the connection is probably intended.
- [14]. The infinitive δοῦναι indicates purpose, “repent so that they might give him glory.”
- [15]. At first glance ἐγένετο . . . ἐσκοτωμένη (*egeneto . . . eskotēmenē*, had been darkened) is a pluperfect periphrastic, but as Wallace (1996: 649) has pointed out, the pluperfect periphrastic often in the Apocalypse should be taken as an attributive participle, “was darkened.”
- [16]. Caird (1966: 204) takes the last three bowls metaphorically as “a triad of political disaster: internal anarchy and invasion from without, leading to irreparable collapse.” Thus, the darkness here is “the total eclipse of the monster’s imperial power.” This is an interesting possibility, but it is insufficient. These judgments certainly include political events, especially in the sixth bowl (16:12–16), but cannot be limited to them. The fifth and seventh bowls are not primarily political.
- [17]. This is a causal use of ἔκ.
- [18]. Fekkes (1994: 201–2) argues that there is no direct connection between Isaiah and Rev. 16:12. Rather, Isaiah demonstrates a parallel use of the Red Sea crossing.
- [19]. Some (R. Charles 1920: 2.49; Aune 1998a: 896) believe that this verse is an interpolation at the second stage of the composition of this book because of its intrusive nature and radical change of style, but the author makes frequent parenthetical comments like this (see, e.g., 13:9–10; 14:12; 20:7–8), and this is the nature of the book. There is no need for such a redactional approach to the book (see “Unity and Structure” in the introduction to this commentary).
- [20]. For a study of the history of views on the meaning of “Armageddon,” see N. Silberman 1999: 36–37. He takes it geographically to be ancient Megiddo, now the Jezreel Valley.
- [21]. In the set of genitives, it is likely that the “cup of wine” is modified with the epexegetical genitive τοῦ θυμοῦ (*tou thymou*, namely, his anger), and that is modified with an adjectival genitive τῆς ὀργῆς (*tēs orgēs*, of his wrath), producing the translation “God gave her the cup of wine, namely his furious wrath” (so Beale 1999: 843; Aune 1998a: 901).

1. The Great Prostitute on the Scarlet Beast (17:1–18)

- [1]. As Aune (1998b: 915) points out, however, 17:1–3 introduces the whole of 17:1–19:4 rather than just chap. 17, for the “judgment” predicted in 17:1 does not come until chap. 18, and in 19:1–2 the great multitude celebrates that God “has judged the great prostitute.” Also, while 17:3 is included with verses 1–2, it actually belongs with the next section (17:3–6) describing the great prostitute.
- [2]. Δεῦρο (*deuro*, come) occurs twice, both times with δεῖξω (17:2; 21:9), and invites John to see the vision itself.
- [3]. This is an objective genitive emphasizing that God is judging the prostitute.
- [4]. For the argument that Jerusalem rather than Rome is the prostitute, see Ford (1975b: 282–88) and Holwerda (1995: 389–91). Few have followed them, however, because the identification with “Babylon the Great” and the imagery of chaps. 17–18 fit Rome too well. As I said on 11:8 above, however, Jerusalem and Rome are amalgamated into one city in Rev. 11–18.
- [5]. Moyise (1995: 72–73) believes that a primary source for the imagery of the great prostitute comes from Ezekiel’s description of apostate Jerusalem in Ezek. 16 and 23 (note that Rev. 17:2 = Ezek. 16:15, 25, 39; Rev. 17:4a = Ezek. 16:13; Rev. 17:4b = Ezek. 23:31–32; Rev. 17:6 = Ezek. 16:38; 23:45).
- [6]. Cleopatra or Messalina (promiscuous wife of the emperor Claudius) would be viable only if one accepted the early date (mid-60s) for the book. By the 90s they were no longer so widely discussed.
- [7]. A less likely but possible view is provided by Johnson (1981: 556) and Thomas (1995: 286). They point to the contrast between the “scarlet” of the beast and the woman in 17:3–4 and the “white” raiment of Christ and the faithful saints in 19:8, 11, 14. Thus, “scarlet” could represent sin and “white” salvation, as in Isa. 1:18 LXX (where both terms are used). Still others (Ladd, Beasley-Murray, Sweet, Beale) see a deliberate connection between the “scarlet beast” and the “red dragon.” While different terms are used, they are sufficiently similar to support the connection, though a further interpretation of the “scarlet” here as denoting the murderous intent of the beast in persecuting the saints may go too far. However, that the woman is “drunk with the blood of the saints” in 17:6 (cf. 16:6; 18:24) could justify such an interpretation. The difficulty is knowing how many different thrusts to see in a single term. All these are possible, but all are not equally probable. Least likely is the Isa. 1:18 connection, and the imagery of persecution is more obvious with regard to the dragon in chap. 12 than in the use of “scarlet” in 17:3–4. However, the others are viable: the worldly luxury, the connection between the dragon and the beast, and the contrast with Christ and the saints.
- [8]. As Wallace (1996: 649) says, the pluperfect periphrastic ἦν περιβεβλημένη (*ēn peribēblēmenē*, had been dressed) should probably be taken as a predicate adjective, “was dressed,” see also 16:10.
- [9]. As Callahan (1999: 50) brings out, this extravagant luxury links the great prostitute with Babylon the city in chap. 18. Both symbolize the Roman Empire and its economic exploitation.
- [10]. This reading is attested by A 051 1 94 1006 2344 vg et al. and has slightly superior manuscript evidence. Some (046 1611 1854 1859 2053 et al.) seem to have been drawn to τῆς γῆς in 17:2 and mistakenly substituted it for αὐτῆς here. Codex Sinaiticus has apparently conflated the two into τῆς πορνείας αὐτῆς καὶ τῆς γῆς.
- [11]. Taking καὶ here as epexegetical, so that “impurity” further defines “abominations.”

- [12]. The genitive *τῆς γῆς* can be taken as descriptive (“earthly abominations”), possessive (“earth’s abominations”), or directional (“abominations on the earth”). The possessive seems best here, for the abominations *belong* to the earthly scene.
- [13]. Aune (1998b: 937) may be correct in seeing the “witnesses” not as the saints but as identical with the “prophets” in 16:6. That parallel is too far away, however, and it is more likely that these are the saints (who in this passage would probably include the prophets of 16:6 as well). The addition of “with the blood of” after “and” simply heightens the connection rather than demands they be a separate group.
- [14]. “Witness to Jesus” is a technical phrase in the book, either with *μαρτυρία* (1:2, 9; 12:17; 19:10; 20:4) or *μάρτυς* (here). It is usually a general genitive referring to Jesus’ witness to God as the basis for our witness to him. Here the objective side is uppermost, for it stresses the martyrdom of the saints as an outgrowth of their witness.
- [15]. Some (Caird, Michaels, Beale) suggest that John at the same time has an “admiration” for the great prostitute, caused by her wealth and splendor or perhaps by the similarity between her attire (17:4) and that of the bride-city of Christ in chap. 21, causing the angel to rebuke him in 17:7. But the vision of chap. 21 has not been given yet, and “admiration” or “adoration” is a far cry from this context. The power and luxury of the woman is everywhere portrayed as an evil thing, attractive only to the earth-dwellers. There is more horror than admiration in what John is feeling at this point, for the language of vv. 3–6 is far from positive.
- [16]. Ford (1975b: 289–90) takes a preterist approach and believes that Vespasian is the seventh and his son Titus the eighth. They form the one who “was” (he was in favor with Nero) but at the time of writing “is not” (he fell out of favor) but is “about to ascend” (to be restored to power), paralleling the empire that “was” (from Caesar to Nero), “is not” (in the year of chaos with four emperors), and would be restored (with the ascension of Vespasian and Titus to the throne). But this depends on dating the book to just before Vespasian became emperor.
- [17]. The transitive verb *ὑπάγει* is found in A 1611 2053 vg and several Old Latin manuscripts et al., while *ὑπάγεν* is found in P 046 051 1 1006 1828 1854 2042 et al. The manuscript evidence is evenly divided, but *ὑπάγει* is more likely for two reasons: (1) it is the more difficult reading, because one would expect a second infinitive after *μέλλει*; and (2) it would be easy to supply a final -v at the end of the word since in ancient manuscripts it was often signified by a horizontal stroke placed above the preceding letter.
- [18]. *Βλεπόντων* (*blepontōn*, seeing) is either circumstantial (“seeing”), temporal (“when they see”), or causal (“because they see”). Of these, temporal is more likely; the causal aspect is seen in the *ὅτι* (*hoti*, because) clause. The reason for the genitive case is uncertain but may be due to attraction to the genitive *ῶν* (*hōn*, whose [name]) earlier in the verse.
- [19]. Another approach is that of Moberly (1992: 376–77), who begins with Caligula and believes Vitellius is the sixth and Vespasian the seventh, so that it was written in autumn 69. Again, the difficulty is the list of emperors and where one starts. There is too little evidence for such an approach.
- [20]. Both Bauckham (1993b: 437–41) and Beale (1999: 876–77) speak of the beast’s “parousia,” meaning that his resurrection in chap. 13 is not the same event as his “second coming” in chap. 17. In this sense, the “mortal wound that heals” comes early in the reign of the beast, and the Parthian invasion (“the kings from the east” [16:12] that reign with him “one hour” [17:12]) that supports his rule comes late in the 42-month reign (Bauckham links it with his “return from the abyss”). The former is his resurrection (chap. 13) and the latter his parousia (chap. 17). This is very interesting, but such a chronology of the story goes beyond the evidence, and it is more likely that the wound that heals is intended in the “is-is not” theme of 17:8, 11. Thus, the events of chap. 17 recapitulate the events of chap. 13.
- [21]. Beale (1999: 878–79) believes that the ten kings are identical to “the kings of the earth” (16:14; 17:2, 18; 18:3, 9; 19:19), but in 16:12, 14 they are almost certainly separate groups of rulers. Yet the two groups are probably amalgamated in 17:18 and 19:19 as they join forces for the final battle.
- [22]. Van Unnik (1970: 218–19) says this phrase in the first century was always used in the context of political thinking when conflict endangered the unity of the state. Thus, it called for consensus for the sake of the state. The ten kings come to unanimous harmony.
- [23]. These are the only two places where the exact title is used, but there are near parallels in the others.
- [24]. Beale (1985: 619–19) and Slater (1993: 159) believe that the background for “King of kings and Lord of lords” is Dan. 4:37 LXX (see also 1 Enoch 9.4), and that the theme from Dan. 4 is the universal defeat of God’s enemies.

2. Fall of Babylon the Great (18:1–24)

- [1]. While there have been attempts to see chaps. 17 and 18 as distinct and even to see two separate “Babylons” in these chapters, Dyer (1987) demonstrates well the unity of these chapters. His further argument that this prophesies a rebuilt Babylon during the tribulation period fails to convince, for “Babylon” is too well attested in the early church as a circumlocution for Rome.
- [2]. As stated earlier, many scholars believe “Babylon” here is not Rome but Jerusalem (Lohmeyer, Ford, Provan). However, the use of “Babylon” for Rome is too prevalent in the early church, and the description of the luxury and power in chap. 18 does not fit first-century Jerusalem.
- [3]. It is common to see *ἰουλακή* as synonymous with “dwelling place” (Swete, Beckwith, Mounce, Beale), but that would be an unusual rendering, and I prefer to keep the Jewish meaning of “prison house” as more in keeping with its use here.
- [4]. Some manuscripts add a fourth line, placed in brackets by UBS⁴ and NA²⁷: [*καὶ ἰουλακὴ παντὸς θηρίου ἀκαθάρτου*]. There is a wide array of differing readings in the bracketed material, with some omitting “unclean spirit” (1611 et al.), others omitting “unclean bird” (A P). The third omission, “unclean beast,” has impressive textual evidence behind it (P C 051 Byz a vg et al.) but is probably a later scribal addition. Therefore, there are three lines (also in keeping with the style of this section).
- [5]. Metzger (1994: 683) notes the five different readings in various manuscripts, which he ascribes to “the difficulty of

understanding the expression, as well as carelessness on the part of copyists.” This is the reading that best explains the others.

[6]. Since God is explicitly mentioned in 18:5, it is more likely Christ.

[7]. The “plagues” would refer not only to the plague-punishments of the trumpets and bowls but to the ultimate destruction of Babylon the Great here in this chapter. The beast recovered from one “plague” (13:3, 12), but neither he nor his followers would recover from this one.

[8]. This is another instance of **συγκοινωνέω**. The verb means an intimate sharing in something, with connotations of becoming a partner in an enterprise. Thus, it fits very well in these two negative contexts.

[9]. Aune (1998b: 995) calls this a “hubris soliloquy” and cites six examples (Ezek. 28:2; Jer. 5:12; Sib. Or. 5.173; Rev. 3:17; 2 Tg. Esth. 1.1; Ovid, *Metam.* 6.170–202).

[10]. A few manuscripts (69 pc Cyp Spec Prim) have **μῆ ὥρα** (*mia hōra*, in one hour) instead of **μῆ ἡμέρα**, a clear assimilation to vv. 10, 17, 19.

[11]. There is considerable confusion in the manuscripts on the exact wording here. For instance, **ⲙⲁⲗⲁ** alone has **ὁ θεὸς ὁ κύριος**, an order not found in the book and a likely scribal error. Also, others (A 1006 1841 2040 2053) just have **ὁ θεός**, a likely scribal omission. Finally, others (2042 and a few minuscules) add **παντοκράτωρ**, an accretion from 1:8; 4:8; 11:17; et al. The reading here, attested in **ⲙⲁⲗⲁ** C P 046 051 et al., is the most likely.

[12]. Bauckham (1993b: 371–72) makes a good case for taking the “kings of the earth” as not just the client kings of Rome but more broadly as the local rulers Rome used to administrate each city: “John’s readers in the province of Asia Minor will have thought most obviously of the local aristocracy who sat on the councils of their cities. For such people Roman authority served to prop up their own dominant position in society.” Bauckham believes that Ps. 2:2, where “kings of the earth” = “rulers,” is behind John’s usage.

[13]. This is a circumstantial participle modifying the main verbs “weep and wail” in 18:9 and parallel to the temporal clause “when they see the smoke of her burning.” In other words, they weep at the torment but stand far off, obviously to avoid the disaster themselves.

[14]. While the main verbs in 18:9 are future (“will weep and wail”), those in 18:11 are present tenses. Most likely this is stylistic variation, and these are futuristic presents emphasizing the certainty of the future event.

[15]. Grammatically, the list switches back and forth from genitives to accusatives. This has no particular grammatical significance but is purely stylistic.

[16]. **Ἀπώλετο** (*apōleto*, destroyed, lost) was probably chosen deliberately to emphasize that God has “destroyed” all that Babylon/Rome stood for, so the luxuries were “lost” to them.

[17]. The wording, **ὁ ἐπὶ τόπον πλέων** (*ho epi topon pleōn*, one who sails to a place) is so unusual an expression that several have suggested emendations (Beckwith, R. Charles, Kraft), and later scribes also substituted different readings, such as replacing **τόπον** with **τῶν πλοίων** (P 051 2042 2065 et al.), with **πόντον** (469 582 2076* 2254 et al.), with **τῶν πλοίων ἐπὶ τόπον** (syr^{pb}), with **τῶν πλοίων ὁ ὄμιλος** (1 296 2049 2186 TR), or with **τὸν ποταμόν** (2053 2062). But the reading here is well attested (A C 94 1006 **ⲙⲁⲗⲁ** with the article] et al.) and, though unusual, makes sense as it is. No emendation is needed.

[18]. Several (Lohmeyer, Giesen, Aune) argue against merchants on the grounds of the general language (Aune 1998b: 1005–6 says the author would have used a more specific term like “port” or “harbor”). But “place” would refer to a city, port, or harbor, and in the context “merchant” fits better than “traveler” or “passenger.” On the whole, Conzelmann’s argument seems better.

[19]. While Mounce (1998: 336) believes that the parallel with the “heaven-dwellers” in 12:12 means the saints here are “the church glorified, not believers on earth,” and Krodel (1989: 306) sees them as the martyrs, Michaels (1997: 207–8) is more likely correct that “heaven” refers to the angels, the living creatures, the elders, and the multitudes in heaven, while the “saints” are believers on earth.

[20]. The hapax legomenon (**ὀρμήματι**, *hormēmati*, with sudden violence) is part of a word group defined by Bertram (TDNT 5:470) as denoting “violent movement uncontrolled by human reason,” as in the casting of demons into the swine (Mark 5:13 par.) or mob violence (Acts 7:57; 19:29); see Lohmeyer, Thomas.

3. Hallelujah Chorus—Joy at His Just Judgment (19:1–5)

[1]. Wall (1991: 219–20) sees a special connection between 11:15 (the seventh trumpet) and 19:1–10, with parallels not only between the participants (the heavenly voices and elders) but also the themes (the power, reign, and eternity of God) as well as the doxological nature of both sets of hymns. The hymn of 11:15–18 also celebrated the final triumph of God over the powers of evil. Shea (1984: 252–53) asserts that the hymns here are deliberately parallel to the four hymns of 5:8–14. Both sets begin and end with the same group—the elders and living creatures in chap. 5 and the great multitude in chap. 19—and there is a reversal in which the group that is first in one chapter is second in the other. Also, the hymn by the elders is essentially the same in both.

[2]. Agreeing with those (Lohmeyer, Beale, Aune) who see **ἐκ** (*ek*) here as instrumental, the blood shed “by her hand.”

[3]. If part of the original text, this is another exegetical **καί** (*kai*), meaning “namely, you who fear him.” It is omitted by **ⲙⲁⲗⲁ** C P pc sa b^{ms} but found in A 051 0229 **ⲙⲁⲗⲁ** latt sy bo. Either way, “you who fear him” describes the “slaves.”

B. Final Victory: The End of the Evil Empire at the Parousia (19:6–21)

[1]. However, if we consider 19:7, “His wife has prepared herself,” the rapture could be seen as implicit in the arrival of the rider on the white horse in 19:11.

- [2]. The genitive plural participle **ΛΕΓΟΝΤΩΝ** (*legontōn*, saying) is a generic masculine referring to all those who were part of the heavenly choir and modifies all three preceding genitives rather than the singular “multitude,” contra Beale (1999: 932–33), who says it refers in a collective sense to OT allusions behind the hymn.
- [3]. Some (R. Charles, Lohmeyer, Aune) take this as a secondary addition to the text by a later editor, but such is hardly necessary in light of the centrality of persevering works throughout the book.
- [4]. It is interesting that no mention is made of the angel who addresses this to John and who is the recipient of his worship in 19:10. Attempts have been made to identify him with a particular angel, like the angel of the bowls who speaks often in chap. 17 (so Lohmeyer, Caird, Giesen). But many angels have been involved in recent chapters, and that he is anonymous here must be respected. He is undoubtedly “another angel” like the one in 18:1.
- [5]. **ΚΕΚΛΗΜΕΝΟΙ** (*keklēmenoi*, called), an intensive perfect, is another divine passive.
- [6]. Taking **ΤΟΥ ΓΑΜΟΥ** (*tou gamou*, of the wedding) as a descriptive genitive.
- [7]. See Osborne 1989 for my understanding of the doctrine of election.
- [8]. M. A. Knibb, *OTP* 2:167.
- [9]. **Ὅρα μή** means literally “see [that you] not” and so is an idiom meaning “Take care! Don’t do that!” (BAGD 578).
- [10]. Here we have another exegetical **καί**, “your brothers and sisters, namely, those who maintain their testimony for Jesus.”
- [11]. Similarly, Miller (1998: 308–9) believes that the emphasis is on a contrast with the false teachers of 2:20–23. Divine activity is only on their side.
- [12]. Mazzaferri (1988) takes this approach but believes that “the testimony of Jesus” refers to Revelation as a prophetic book that was at the same time Jesus’ personal testimony and Spirit-inspired.
- [13]. The perfect participle **ἤνεωγμένον** (*ēneōgmenon*, opened) is intensive, meaning “the heavens stand open.”
- [14]. The switch to intensive perfects and present tenses in 19:11–16 is dramatic, to place the reader at this critical event in salvation history. In another sense, they are prophetic, stressing the certainty of the future events, seen also in the switch to future tenses in 19:15b (see below). Swete (1911: 251) considers them gnomic, expressing what God always does.
- [15]. Others think it could be the name of 19:13—directly after “the name that no one knows” we are told “his name is the Word of God.” But the link between 19:12 and 19:13 is tenuous, especially since it is unlikely that John would reveal a name “no one knows” in the next verse.
- [16]. The intensive perfect participles continue the force of 19:12 (see n. 14 above).
- [17]. The two pictures of the sword and the iron scepter are intertwined and build on each other.
- [18]. **ΠΟΙΜΑΝΕῖ** switches from the present tenses of vv. 11–16 to the future tense, thus bringing out dramatically the proleptic orientation of the whole of vv. 11–16. These anticipated events are certain to take place.
- [19]. As in 16:19 (“the cup filled with wine, namely his furious wrath”), **ΤΟΥ ΘΥΜΟΥ** is an exegetical genitive, “which is,” and **Τῆς ὀργῆς** is an adjectival genitive, “furious.”
- [20]. It was quite common in the Greco-Roman world to place inscriptions on the thighs of statues (for examples, see R. Charles 1920: 2.137; Aune 1998b: 1062).
- [21]. With **ἔκραξεν** (*ekraxen*, cried) the narrative returns to the aorists that have characterized the visions. The present tenses of 19:11–16 stressed the certainty of the future events, and now the aorists look to that certainty from another perspective, that of an event which is so certain that it is looked upon as if it had already occurred. Aspect theory (Porter 1994: 302–3) would help understand how they function. The present tenses would stress the “foreground” or prominent features of the text (the character of the returning Christ), while the aorist tenses would provide the “background” or backbone of the story (the battle and its aftermath).
- [22]. The view of Beale (1999: 966, following Caird) that the “third woe” of 8:13 is further developed here on the basis of the “flying in midair” overstates the data. There is a connection, but all three passages are woven together, not just 8:13 and 19:17.
- [23]. **Χιλήρχων** (*chiliarchōn*, generals, tribunes) refers to the leader of a cohort, a battalion of five hundred to a thousand (**χίλιος**) soldiers. It was the highest military command, and there were six to a legion, with one of them assuming command of the legion during battle (see Aune 1998b: 1064; Balz, *EDNT* 3:466).
- [24]. Contra Klassen (1966: 305–7), who says the believers do not participate because there is no battle. As in 17:14, the saints do accompany Christ, but it is the Lamb who conquers. The idea of smashing a potter’s vessel here is an Egyptian and Mesopotamian custom and symbolizes a “universal, judicial authority” rather than destruction. The difficulty with Klassen’s interpretation is the use of the imagery of the shepherd’s club in Ps. 2:9 and the destructive imagery of that passage.
- [25]. Caird (1966: 245) believes the “sword” in 19:15, 21 is “the proclamation of the gospel,” but such a view hardly fits the constant imagery of the courtroom and the battlefield in this context.

C. The Thousand-Year Reign of Christ and Final Destruction of Satan (20:1–10)

- [1]. For a history of the amillennial position, see Hesselink 1998–99.
- [2]. In another anacoluthon, **ὁ ὄφις ὁ ἀρχαῖος** (*ho ophis ho archaios*, the ancient serpent) switches from the accusative of the noun with which it is in apposition, **Τὸν δράκοντα** (*ton drakonta*, the dragon), to the nominative. This makes it virtually a title. Such anacolutha are frequent in the book (1:8; 2:20; 3:12; etc.).
- [3]. Contra S. Thompson (1999: 259–60), who takes 1 Enoch 10.4–6, 11–13 on the binding of Azazel and Semyaza as a separate event. He believes they are not synonyms for Satan and that binding is noneschatological and describes God limiting the power of evil. They are still a symbolic type of Satan, however, and are used in that way here.
- [4]. This is the view of Ostella (1975: 238), who argues that the deception here is defined by the unit in which it is found (19:11–

20:3). This is not the deception of 20:7–8, because that occurs after the thousand years, nor is it the deception of earlier parts of the Apocalypse. Thus, the millennium must come after the parousia.

[5]. Some (Farrer, Beasley-Murray, Krodel) believe that this has its origins in Ezek. 36–48, in which the resurrection of Israel (36–37) is followed by the rebellion of Gog and Magog (38–39) and then the new Jerusalem and new temple (40–48). This pattern in a sense is followed here, with the parousia and resurrection in 19:6–10 and 20:4–6, the final rebellion in 20:3c and 20:7–10, and the “New Jerusalem” in chap. 21. This also follows Gen. 3; the serpent was allowed to enter the first Eden, so he must be allowed to enter the second restored Paradise. I find the first part of this (Ezekiel) viable but the second part (Genesis) too speculative.

[6]. Beale (1999: 996) argues that there are both angels and saints sitting on the thrones.

[7]. Gourgues (1985) provides an alternative view, that these are the victorious saints but they are in heaven; so the millennium is a celestial rather than an earthly reign with Christ. This is an interesting possibility but is problematic because it has to separate 20:4–6 (heavenly) from 20:1–3, 7–10 (earthly). There are no contextual indicators of such a switch in perspective.

[8]. As Roloff (1993: 227) says, these are the “thrones of dominion.”

[9]. Beale (1999: 998) points out that τὰς ψυχάς (*tas psychas*, the souls) must not be seen as “living body” (as in 8:9; 12:11; 16:3), because the body has already been beheaded. Thus, they are the souls of those who died for Christ and were translated to heaven.

[10]. E. Müller (1999: 233) says the thrones are in heaven since elsewhere in the book only the enemies of God have earthly thrones. However, the entire scene of 20:1–10 is earthly.

[11]. If αὐτοῖς (*autois*, to them) is understood as an indirect object (as most take it), it means God has given them “authority to judge.” But if it is a dative of advantage, it means God has made a judgment “for them,” i.e., “in favor of them.” While the latter would be in keeping with Dan. 7:22 (see above), the emphasis on the authority of the saints in the throne imagery (Luke 22:30; 1 Cor. 6:2; Rev. 1:6; 5:10) makes the former the more likely view (see Boring 1989: 203).

[12]. Beale (1999: 998–99) believes that this is a heavenly court and that it refers to the believers’ heavenly reign after death, arguing that 42 of the 46 uses of “throne” in the book are heavenly. This is based on his view that 20:1–10 refers to the church age and thus 20:4–6 relates the reward awaiting the faithful saints after death. For those who take this as an earthly kingdom following the parousia, the “thrones” here would be earthly.

[13]. Beale (1999: 1001) believes they are distinct because οἱ τινες (*hoitines*, who) is masculine nominative and does not modify the feminine accusative τὰς ψυχάς. But John contains such grammatical anomalies throughout his book, and it is more likely that all of 20:4 is one group, the martyrs.

[14]. Kraft (1974: 257) notes especially the influence of Isa. 26:19 (“But your dead will live, their bodies will rise”), Ezek. 37:1–14 (the valley of dry bones), and Dan. 12:2 (“Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake”) on the resurrection language here.

[15]. Marshall (1968: 335–37) responds to R. Charles (1920: 1.368–70), who says the resurrection is only for the martyrs. But the rest of the NT teaches that the parousia is for the living (1 Cor. 15:51–52; Mark 13:20, 26–27; Heb. 9:28; James 5:7–8; 2 Pet. 3:14; 1 John 2:28). Moreover, in Rev. 2:25 and 3:11 there is no indication of universal martyrdom, and in 3:10 the saints are preserved from the hour of trial. Finally, in Rev. 22:7, 12, 17, 20 the parousia is anticipated for the living, not just for the martyrs.

[16]. For an extensive argument on this as the major thrust, see Poythress 1993.

[17]. Some (Beale 1999: 1021, noting Morris 1987: 238) overstate the force of ὅταν (*hotan*) as an indefinite relative (“whenever”) to stress the symbolic nature of the thousand-year period, but in the Koine period it had often lost its indefiniteness and had a force similar to ὅτε (“when”; cf. Zerwick 1963: §337). In the context here it speaks of a definite time before the action of the main clause (with the aorist, see BAGD 588) and so means that Satan will be released “after” the period is complete.

[18]. This is the third time this has been stressed; cf. 20:3, 5. There is great emphasis on the completion of the thousand years, because a major purpose of the millennium is to prepare the way for the defeat of Satan and the great white throne judgment.

[19]. As stated in 20:3, the amillennialist position takes this as Satan’s inability to deceive the “Gentiles” (another possible meaning [along with “nations”] of ἔθνη, *ethnē*) as he used to (before the universal mission of the church) and thus as a description of what began to happen in the Book of Acts with the Gentile mission. Satan then will not be released (to have total power over the Gentiles) until the end of history, when he will be allowed a final rebellion leading up to “the final war of history,” namely the Armageddon of 16:14 and 19:19 (so Beale 1999: 1022).

[20]. Here and in 20:8 (“will come out”) there are two future tenses in the midst of the aorists that dominate 20:1–10. This puts emphasis on the future certainty that Satan will indeed be released by God and come to deceive the nations.

[21]. Beale (1999: 1029–30) argues that they are the same event and that the “beast and false prophet” are evil institutions along with the people who make them up. Thus, they are the unsaved who suffer eternal punishment in 20:13–14. But if Satan is an individual, why not the beast and false prophet? It is better to see these as three distinct groups that suffer divine judgment in stages (the beast and false prophet in 19:20b, Satan in 20:10, evil humankind in 20:15).

D. Great White Throne Judgment (20:11–15)

[1]. The mention of “great and small” summed up all types of the saved in 11:18 and 19:5 and all types of the unsaved in 13:16 and 19:18. The order is reversed in this verse but without any special emphasis.

[2]. Bauckham (1993c: 271–73, 276–78) traces the background of the sea giving up its dead. It parallels 1 Enoch 51.1 (earth and Sheol “returning that entrusted to it”); 2 Esdr. (4 Ezra) 7:32 (“give back those that sleep”; cf. 4:41–43); 2 Bar. 21.23 (“receive the dead”); 42.8 (“raise up all that you [the dust] have kept”); and Apoc. Pet. 4.3–4 (Gehenna “gives back all who are in it”; cf. 4.10–12). He argues that there are two types of scenes: the dead return to life on earth (i.e., no separation of body from the spirit) and the reunion of the body with the soul. Jewish ideas were more in the former vein.

A. Coming of New Heaven and New Earth (21:1–8)

- [1]. As Sweet (1979: 300) brings out, “in vv. 5–8 God is himself ratifying what John has seen” in vv. 1–4.
- [2]. Minear (1962: 25–26) says that heaven and earth here are a “single, interlocking reality,” so the first earth and heaven must pass away together, and the new creation concerns both.
- [3]. Van Ruiten (1993: 480–82) believes that Isa. 65:17–20 is the primary OT passage behind the new heaven and new earth here. Thus, the “former things” that have passed away are the “former troubles not remembered” of Isaiah, possibly on the basis of Isa. 42:9 and 48:3 (“come to pass”), and especially 1 Enoch 91.16 (“The first heaven shall pass away and a new heaven appear”).
- [4]. Some scholars, however, believe that the passage here follows the Jewish tradition of a renovated earth. Heide (1997: 43) states this is not an *ex nihilo* new creation but a transformed world. In 21:1 the old heaven and earth were not destroyed but “departed” or “went away” from sight. In 2 Pet. 3:10–13 this was cleansing judgment rather than total destruction. Similarly, Caird (1966: 265) says the old earth is not “cast as rubbish into the void” and calls this “the process of re-creation by which the old is transformed into the new.” Prigent (1981: 324–25) labels this a “renovation” of the existing earth. As stated above, however, the language favors a destruction of the old order and a brand “new heaven and new earth.”
- [5]. Park (1995: 153–54) points out also that in Revelation the “heaven, earth, and sea” are part of a tripartite universe (5:13; 10:6; 14:7; perhaps implied in 5:3; 7:1; 12:12). This would also explain the presence of “sea” here.
- [6]. Michaels (1997: 234) also believes this is related to chap. 20 and finds a chiasm:
- A The sea gave up the dead that were in it
B Death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them
B’ Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire
A’ there was no longer any sea
- [7]. This is a dative of advantage. As Beale (1999: 1045) points out, “This conveys the thought of God’s preparation of his people for himself.”
- [8]. Van Ruiten (1993: 497–98) would add Lev. 26:11 and Ps. 78:60 to Ezek. 37:27 as OT background for the idea of God tabernacling with his people.
- [9]. Bauckham (1993b: 310–13) takes τῶν ἀνθρώπων (*tōn anthrōpōn*, humanity) and λαοί (*laoi*, peoples) as a reference to “all the nations” and believes 21:3 refers to the conversion of the nations and their inclusion in the New Jerusalem. The nations do not enter the picture until 21:24, however, and it is unlikely they are intended here. As Schnabel (1999: 20–21) says, the reference in the context is to the resurrected saints (chaps. 19–20) who have “overcome” (21:7). Therefore, it is the “multi-ethnic composition of the church” (cf. Kiddle, Gundry, E. Müller, Giesen, Beale) rather than the nations that is in view.
- [10]. Moo (1996: 520–21) brings out well the “already–not yet” language of Paul here. Our “adoption” and “redemption” have been begun in our lives via regeneration and the work of the Spirit but will not be completed until the body has been completely transformed and we are like Christ in heaven.
- [11]. The singular Γέγονεν (*Gegonen*, It is over) occurs in 16:17, emphasizing the events as a single whole, while this has the plural Γέγοναν, emphasizing each of the events.
- [12]. Beale (1999: 1058) shows how these promises are fulfilled at the end of the book: eating from the tree of life (2:7 = 22:2), not hurt by the second death (2:11 = 21:7–8), the hidden manna and the white stone (2:17 = 19:9), a bright stone and the morning star (2:17, 28 = 21:11, 18–21, 23; 22:5, 16), name in the book of life and acknowledged before the Father (3:5 = 21:27), bright garments (3:5 = 19:7–8, 21:2, 9–10), a pillar in the temple (3:12 = 21:22–23), participation in the New Jerusalem (3:12 = 21:2), the name of God written (3:12 = 22:4), and sitting with Christ on his throne (2:26–27; 3:21 = 20:4; 22:3–5).
- [13]. The article is found only before the first of the sins, so by Sharp’s rule these all fit one category of individuals—unbelievers (see Wallace 1996: 180, who calls this an “overlapping group” because each part of the list belongs to different individuals).
- [14]. See the excellent synoptic comparison of these three in Aune 1998b: 1130–31.
- [15]. It is interesting that this term is followed by “unbelievers,” which may describe that to which the cowardice leads. In Matt. 8:26 Jesus combines the two terms when he challenges the disciples, “O you of little faith, why are you so timid [cowardly]?” (cf. Mark 4:40). The lack of faith of the disciples could, at the next stage, become unbelief.

B. New Jerusalem as the Holy of Holies (21:9–27)

- [1]. Aune (1998b: 1151) believes that this use of γυνή (*gynē*, woman, wife) may also be intended to further the contrast of Rome as γυνή in 17:3, 4, 6, 7, 9, 18 with the Holy City as γυνή in 19:7 and 21:9.
- [2]. In keeping with the numerous grammatical anomalies in the Apocalypse, the first (“held the glory of God”) is correctly accusative (ἔχουσιν), while the two in 21:12 are nominative, probably attracted to ὁ ἰωσήφ in 21:11.
- [3]. Interestingly, Block (1998: 736) notes the design of the temple tower of Marduk in Babylon, Etemenanki, “whose sacred precinct was also laid out as a square, accessible through twelve gates,” though the gates were not equally distributed with three on each side.
- [4]. Those who argue this way say that the presence of nations and kings (v. 24) as well as the impure, the shameful, and the deceitful means there will be a need for watchmen and walls (so Aune 1998b: 1154). All such evil people have been thrown into the lake of fire, however, and this simply says they will never be a danger.
- [5]. Some (Krodel 1989: 358; Beale 1999: 1070) have pointed out that one would expect Israel to be the foundation since it was first in redemptive history, while the church should be the gates as the entrance to the new community of Christ. However, the image of the apostles as a “foundation” is frequent in the NT (see passages below), and that of Israel as a “gate” is a challenge to the Jewish people to become a “gate” once more by turning to the Messiah (contra their current status as “the synagogue of

Satan”; cf. 2:9; 3:9).

[6]. Aune (1998b: 1159) notes that one of the New Jerusalem texts from Qumran (5QNJ) describes an angel who measures the walls of the New Jerusalem and finds them 140 by 100 *res* or about 32 by 23 kilometers in size.

[7]. Kraft (1974: 270–71) believes the “foursquare” nature and great size of Babylon provides the best background for the description of the celestial city. At the secondary level, this is viable due to the contrasts elsewhere between Babylon/the great harlot and the New Jerusalem. However, the primary symbol has to be the Holy of Holies (see Rissi 1972: 62; Park 1995: 197–99).

[8]. Topham (1989b: 417–19) emends the “stadia” to “cubits” in order to correct what he perceives to be an unreasonable size. The result is a city about 3½ miles square.

[9]. Beale argues that it is the height of the wall that is measured on the grounds that in the OT the height is stressed to emphasize security (Deut. 3:5; 28:52). Aune (1998b: 1162), however, points out that in many ancient cities the thickness of the wall is stressed (Neh. 3:8; 12:38; Jer. 51:58; Herodotus 1.178 [who says Babylon’s walls were 50 cubits thick]). In Ezek. 40:5 both the height and the width are measured, but in 41:5, 9, 12 it is the width that is measured.

[10]. No 1,500-mile-high wall would be only 216 feet thick at the base.

[11]. Topham (1989a) also interprets this to refer to a symbolic meaning and argues that behind “144” is the Hebrew “son of God” (בן־אלהים בן, *bn ʾĀwhym*, whose letters add up to 144). On the other hand, Bohak (1990) uses gematria to compute that 144 equals ἄγγελος, saying that the 144 means “the measure of the angel.”

[12]. Herod’s temple was also overlaid with gold, so John would also have this in view, since he had often seen it with his own eyes.

[13]. Park (1995: 206–7) adds that the double use of καθαρός (*katharos*)—pure gold like *pure* glass—may be a reference to the cultic purity of the tabernacle, as “pure gold” was used to make articles for both the tabernacle (Exod. 25:11, 24–25, 31–32) and the Solomonic temple (2 Chron. 3:4–5; 4:20–21). Thus, it stresses the sacred character of the celestial city in keeping with its depiction as a Holy of Holies.

[14]. This does not mean that the foundation stones were merely “decorated” (NIV) with the precious jewels. It is indeed likely that they consisted entirely of that jewel (so Kraft; Reader 1981: 433; Thomas; Beale). This would be indicated by the fact that the twelve jewels are in the nominative while their antecedent (“with every type of precious stone”) is in the dative. They should be translated, “The first foundation *was* jasper,” and so on, indicating it is made of jasper. Thus, each foundation jewel is individually emphasized and, like the wall in 21:18, is entirely made of that particular jewel. In this sense “adorned with” should be translated “was made beautiful with” (so Beale 1999: 1080).

[15]. Jart (1970: 153–54) claims that several Jewish writers linked the jewels on the high priest’s breastplate with the signs of the zodiac, e.g., Philo (*Mos.* 2.122–25) and Josephus (*Ant.* 3.7.5 §§166–71; *J.W.* 5.5.7 §§233–35).

[16]. Another might be mentioned. Wojciechowski (1987: 153–54) has attempted to take the first letters of the jewels (minus the sixth because of its negative thrust) as ancient symbols for christological titles: “Jesus Christ Savior,” “Christ the King and the End,” “Christ the Son of Man.” Thus, the apostolic witness to Christ is the foundation of the church. This is interesting but too speculative to be likely (for instance, the omission of the sixth on the basis of 13:18 is unlikely).

[17]. Nearly all versions use the same English word, “jacinth,” for the two Greek words behind the seventh jewel in Exodus (ἀγύριον) and the eleventh jewel in Revelation (ὁάκινθος).

[18]. For instance, Joosten (1999: 135–43) shows that chalcedony is the same as the jewel תַּרְשִׁיֶּשׁ (*taršiš*) in the breastplate of the high priest in Exod. 18:20.

[19]. I am indebted to James P. Sweeney for his excellent paper on this in my Ph.D. seminar on apocalyptic.

[20]. This is better than to take it as a collective singular referring to all the streets of the eternal city (so R. Charles 1920: 2.170; Beale 1999: 1089). Aune (1998b: 1166) sees it as an open plaza or square in the center of the city. That is possible, and in that sense the bodies of the witnesses would be lying in a plaza rather than a street.

[21]. The aspect that it “will not be remembered” may have been taken from Isa. 65:17, “Behold, I will create new heavens and a new earth. The former things will not be remembered, nor will they come to mind.”

[22]. The aorist follows present tenses in 21:22b and 21:23a. There is a chiastic order in the tenses of 21:22–23:

A I did not see a temple

B for the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple.

B’ The city has no need of sun or moon

A’ for the glory of God provided its light.

These are prophetic aorists that complement the present tenses by emphasizing the certainty of the future reality (stressed in the present tenses).

[23]. R. Charles (1920: 2.171–72) believes the wording here is based on a translation of the Hebrew text of Isa. 60:19, but Aune (1998b: 1168–69) follows Wilcox (1980: 207–8) in saying the wording may reflect a tradition similar to that found in Tg. Isa. 60:19, which alone has the phrase “you shall no longer need” (it is not found in LXX or MT).

[24]. The future tense here makes explicit the prophetic force of the present and aorist tenses of vv. 22–23 (see above).

[25]. For the theme of the procession of the nations elsewhere, see Jer. 3:17; 33:9; Mic. 4:1–5; Zeph. 3:9–10; Hag. 2:7; Zech. 8:20–23.

[26]. Verses 24–26 use future tenses throughout except here, where John switches to the present tense λέγουσιν. As aspect theory says, this places the action of the kings “bearing” their glory into the celestial city in the “foreground” of the action (see Porter 1994: 302–3).

[27]. Isaiah has both images side by side. The nations “come to the light” (60:3) and “proclaim the praise of the Lord” (60:6) and at

the same time are taken as conquered foes in God's victory procession (60:5, 11). John has already dealt with the military victory in chap. 19 and here centers only on the conversion imagery.

[28]. Some (Aune 1998b: 1173, following Lohmeyer) have called this a redactional insertion because it interrupts the imagery of the nations bringing in the glory to the eternal city. But this is unnecessary, for it follows naturally the contours of Isa. 60:3, 11 and fits the context well.

C. New Jerusalem as the Final Eden (22:1–5)

[1]. Attempts to allegorize the river as the Holy Spirit (Swete 1911: 298; Beale 1999: 1104) fail, for as Mounce (1998: 398) says, it actually means that “in the eternal state the faithful will live at the source of the life-giving stream that proceeds from the very presence of God.”

[2]. The Greek has *ἐντεῦθεν καὶ ἐκεῖθεν* (*enteuthen kai ekeithen*, lit., “from here and from there”), thus meaning “on each side or bank” of the river (see BAGD 268). Delebecque (1988) argues, on the other hand, that these words mean that the trees are of equal distance “from the street and from the river” and stand between them. However, the thrust “on both banks of the river” seems closer to the meaning.

[3]. With *τῶν ἔθνων* an objective genitive: the leaves of the tree of life “heal the nations.”

[4]. Swete (1911: 300) believes that *κατάθεμα* is a stronger word than *ἀνάθεμα* and refers not just to the ban but to the destruction of the thing “cursed.” However, the use of the latter in Zech. 14:11 LXX in the sense of destruction militates against this.

[5]. Aune (1998b: 1183) notes 2 Esdr. (4 Ezra) 7:38–42, which lists twenty-seven things that will disappear in the final judgment: sun, moon, stars, cloud, thunder, lightning, wind, water, air, darkness, evening, morning, summer, spring, heat, winter, frost, cold, hail, rain, dew, noon, night, dawn, shining, brightness, and light.

VI. Epilogue (22:6–21)

[1]. Lohmeyer (1926: 163) has a different order, with 22:6–7 part of the previous section which consists of three parts focusing on the three speeches: of God (21:5–8), of the angel (21:9–22:5), and of Christ (22:6–7). Thus, the epilogue begins with 22:8.

[2]. Contra Wall (1991: 258) and Aune (1998b: 1182), who take it of the vision of chaps. 21–22; but note “this book” in 22:7, 9, 10, which certainly means the whole content of the visions in the Apocalypse.

[3]. Due to the unusual title here, some manuscripts changed the reading to “holy prophets” (051 $\square^A$) and others to “the spirits and prophets” (2030 2377).

[4]. Michaels (1997: 250) argues that the “spirits” are the “seven spirits” before the throne from 1:4; 4:5; 5:6. That is a possibility, especially if that is a reference to the Holy Spirit (contra Michaels). But the parallel with 1 Cor. 14:32 makes it more likely that this refers to the “prophetic spirit.”

[5]. Beale (1999: 1124) correctly identifies this as an objective genitive, “the Lord God [ruling] over [or inspiring?] the spirits.”

[6]. Ladd (1972: 291–92) more correctly restricts this to the aspect of contextualization or relevance: “While the book is primarily concerned with the climax of the struggle in the appearance of Antichrist, it is also relevant to Christian experience wherever and whenever the antichristian principle of totalitarianism manifests itself.”

[7]. These are present participles to emphasize the ongoing reception of the visions throughout the Apocalypse. They refer to the past reception leading up to the present final vision, however, and so are best rendered by a perfect tense in English.

[8]. Some (Beale 1999: 1128, following Prigent) believe that “prophets” does not refer to a special office in the church but more generally describes all the righteous who faithfully follow Christ. This is also the view of some later manuscripts ($\square^A$ Prim) that omit *καί* (*kai*, and) and seem to link the “prophets” with “those who keep the words of this book.” But the emphasis in this section is on the prophecies delivered to the church and on John as a “prophet,” and therefore the prophets themselves are most likely in mind.

[9]. Some (Lohmeyer; Caird; Bauckham 1993b: 312) restrict this to the Christian martyrs, but the imagery is too broad for that. It must refer to all believers. In 21:1–22:5 the images of the gates and the tree of life refer to all the saints, not just those who have been martyred.

[10]. The grammar is somewhat difficult. The *ἵνα* (*hina*, so that) indicates the results of washing their robes, and it is followed first by the future *ἔσται* (*estai*, will be) and then by the aorist subjunctive *εἰσελθῶσιν* (*eiselthōsin*, enter). This mixing of the forms is seen in 3:9, and the future tense after *ἵνα* is seen in 6:4, 11; 9:5, 20; 13:12; 14:13 (see Swete 1911: 307).

[11]. Philonenko (1997) sees a parallel with the Jewish refusal to allow dogs in the temple grounds, since they might eat the sacrificial meat. Here the unsaved are called spiritual “dogs” and excluded from the heavenly temple/New Jerusalem.

[12]. Earlier Aune (1989: 107–8) mentioned four options for the “you” here: potential martyrs in the church (so Caird); lectors responsible to read the book to the churches (so Zahn); envoys who were to deliver the book to the churches (not mentioned by scholars but still a possibility); and John's fellow prophets, who were to disseminate the book in the churches (Aune's view).

[13]. Some (Swete 1911: 309; Thomas 1995: 510) interpret this as saying Christ is both the ancestor (“root”) and descendant (“offspring”) of David, thus referring to Jesus' preexistence. But as Beale (1999: 1146) says, “root” refers not so much to origin as derivation. In other words, the two terms are similar in meaning.

[14]. As Aune (1998b: 1228) points out, there are two other ways of understanding “the one who hears”: (1) someone who hears the invitation and passes it on to others; (2) John as the hearer who reiterates the invitation.

[15]. It has also been labeled a “canonization formula” (Käsemann), but there is no hint in Revelation that John expected it to be placed in a canon on the same level as the books of the OT. More likely, this formula was to authenticate that the prophecies were

from God and must be heeded.

[16]. Thomas (1995:516–17) erroneously believes that the warnings involve the cessation of prophecy itself. He takes this as a canonization model and argues that it entails not only the close of the NT canon but by extension the close of further uses of the gift of prophecy. But there is neither a hint of the close of the canon nor of the cessation of the prophetic gift. The warnings are addressed to the twisting of the meaning of the prophecies and do not apply to the prophetic gift itself.